

Water Board members may face recall

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER

Sentinel Staff Writer

BOULDER CREEK — A citizen's group active in lobbying for a sewer solution for Valley residents has announced its intention to recall four of the five members of the San Lorenzo Valley Water Board.

Members of the Save the San Lorenzo Valley Association say they want to oust directors Dexter Ahlgren, Mary Kelly, Judy Fowler, and Michael Burk, whom they blame for the district's failure to get government funding for a sewer treatment plant and septic tank repair project.

The group was formed last January in an attempt to encourage the water district to come up with a sewer solution, possibly by hooking into the city of Santa Cruz's pipeline to the ocean. It has a core group of about 50 supporters.

The water district eventually pursued a plan to build a sewer treatment plant in Felton and a complicated septic tank maintenance and repair program. Last week the state told the district it would not get grant funding for the \$45-million-plus effort to clean up septic pollution in the San Lorenzo River.

The denial leaves San Lorenzo Valley residents facing a Regional Water Quality Control Board mandate to stop using septic tanks after the summer of 1986, but with no sewer project to replace them.

The water district is also saddled with a bill for more than \$2 million for engineering on a project which will not be built. That money, say water district officials, must be paid by residents who would have used the sewer.

Group spokesman Dr. Kenneth Reed said the fault for the project's demise lies, at least in part, with the Water Board "because of its failure to act soon enough."

"We don't know what all the answers are, but if we had a Water Board that was working for the good of the Valley, it would help," Reed said.

The Water Board majority "has displayed, if not incompetence, then a total unwillingness to solve the wastewater problem in the San Lorenzo Valley," said group member Jim Lee.

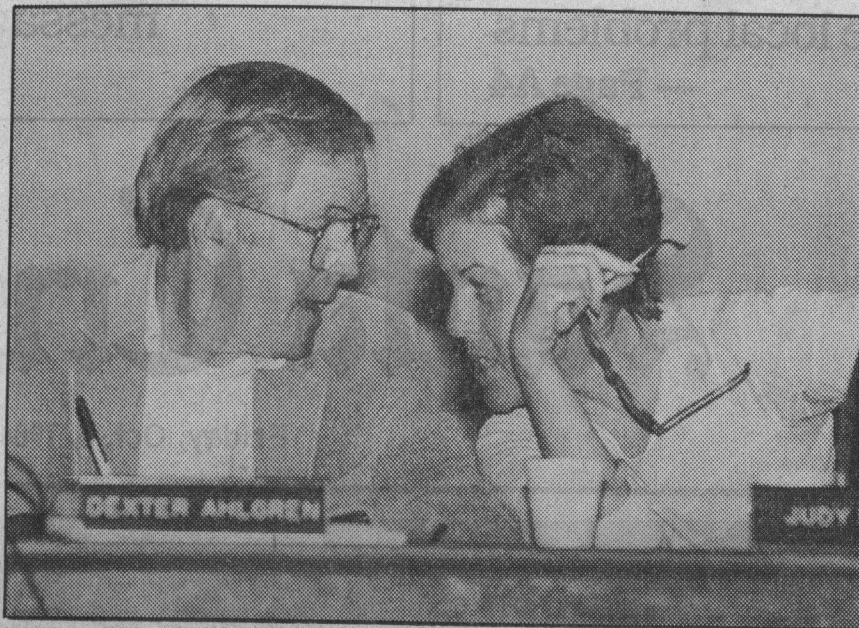
Lee echoed a commonly heard criticism of the Water Board: that the board majority has used the sewer issue to control growth.

He compared the Water Board to a relay team, in which there are different competitors running at different speeds, "but they're all going in the same direction."

"They've done a generally poor job over the years. My feeling is there's been a misdeal in the cards. Let's deal them again."

The only member exempt from the movement is Fred Nitz, who Reed said was "generally supportive" of the sewer project.

The other board members, Reed says,



Directors Dexter Ahlgren, left, and Judy Fowler



Mary Kelly

have voted against Nitz on crucial decisions regarding the sewer project.

Nitz declined to comment on the recall.

But other directors, saying they were not surprised by the movement, denied the charges.

Ahlgren said the growth issue was "a smoke screen" for the real issues of the sewer project, which were affordability and environmental safety.

He noted that some of the members of the Save the San Lorenzo Valley Association also were part of an ad-hoc committee established in 1981 to look at various septic solutions. The citizens group recommended against tying into the Santa Cruz ocean pipeline.

"They have a need to blame someone, but nothing anybody could have done would have changed anything," Ahlgren said.

Fowler said she was "not surprised" because the Save the San Lorenzo Valley Association had been vocal about its dissatisfaction with the Water Board.

"I find it ironic because Mike (Burk) and I have voted with Fred almost exclusively in the last year to keep the project moving forward."

It would be "unfortunate" for the board to be recalled now because they still have to deal with the Regional Water Quality Control Board, she said.

Burk and Kelly could not be reached for comment.

The last successful recall was in 1977,

when voters removed Kelly's husband, Larry, and two others from the Water Board and replaced them with representatives considered to be less environmentally strident.

To successfully petition for a recall election, the group must collect signatures from 2,250 of the 9,000 registered voters in the San Lorenzo Valley Water District, according to Elections Supervisor Frances Giardina.

Then, they must then draft their own petition, listing the reasons for their dissatisfaction. It usually takes about six months for the process to be completed, Giardina said.

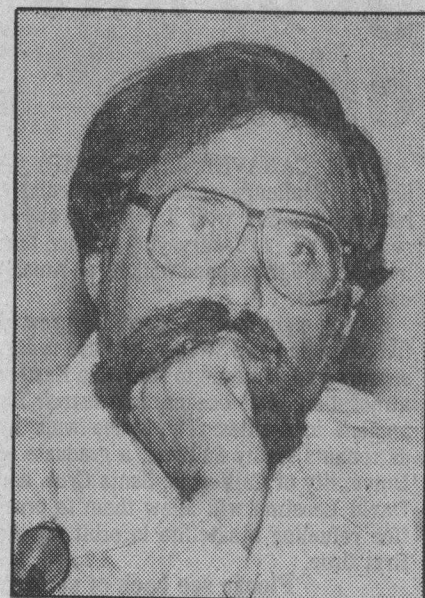
For the petition to qualify, however, the group will have to find four people willing to take the job.

Fowler, Burk and Nitz were originally appointed to their positions. Nitz and Burk later ran unopposed for election.

Fowler had to be appointed by the county Board of Supervisors when no one stepped forward to fill a vacancy in the 1983 election.

Ahlgren and Kelly ran for office in 1981 and have one year left in their terms. Fowler and Burk have three years remaining.

Voters who live outside the water district boundaries are not eligible to vote in the recall drive, even though they were to have been served by the proposed sewer system, and septic tank repair and replacement district.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Michael Burk

Giardina said she has received calls from persons asking for information on recalling Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, but this cannot be done until next year, she said.

County elections codes prohibit voters from recalling an elected official six months from the end of his term or less than 90 days after he has taken office.