

SUBSCRIBER EDITION

Account

Saturday, July 29, 2023
Today's eEdition

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

78°F 91° 61°

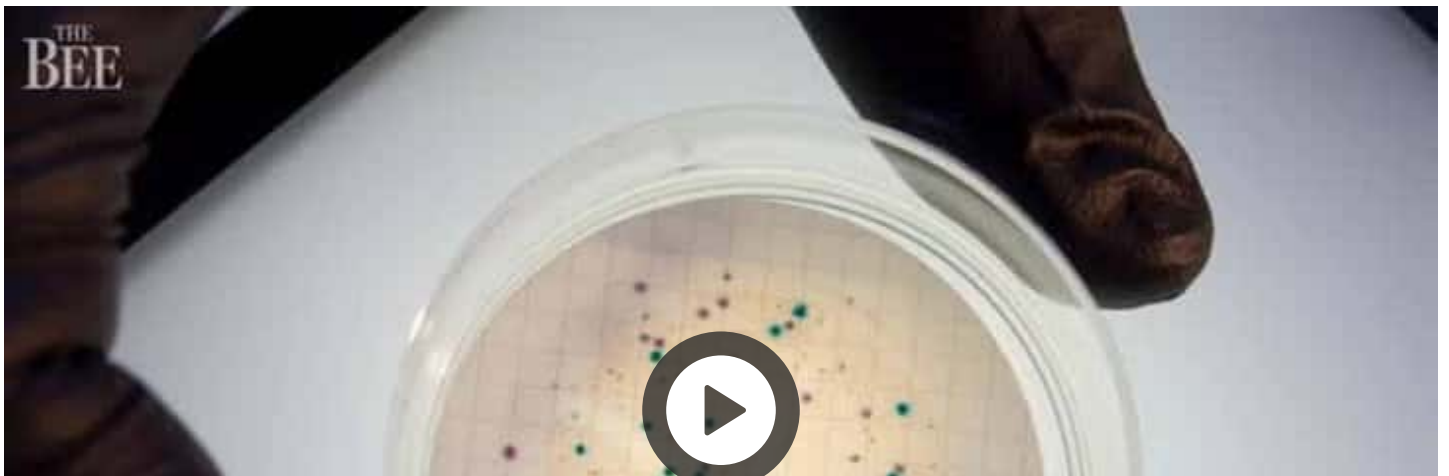
News Sports Politics Opinion Obituaries • Personal Finance Food & Drink Bee Curic

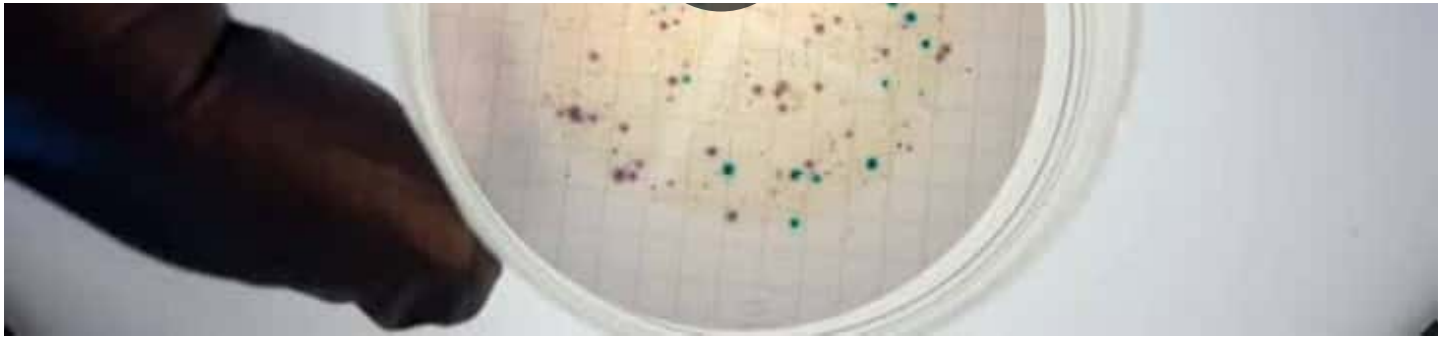
WATER & DROUGHT

Cow feces and an E. coli scare: How a troubled water district points to a big California problem

BY RYAN SABALOW

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 23, 2017 9:43 AM





A raucous board meeting points to broader problems at a troubled water district in Glenn County. By Randall Benton and Ryan Sabalow. BY MCCLATCHY



Only have a minute? Listen instead

Powered by **Trinity Audio**

00:00

10 10 1.0x

14:24

BUTTE CITY

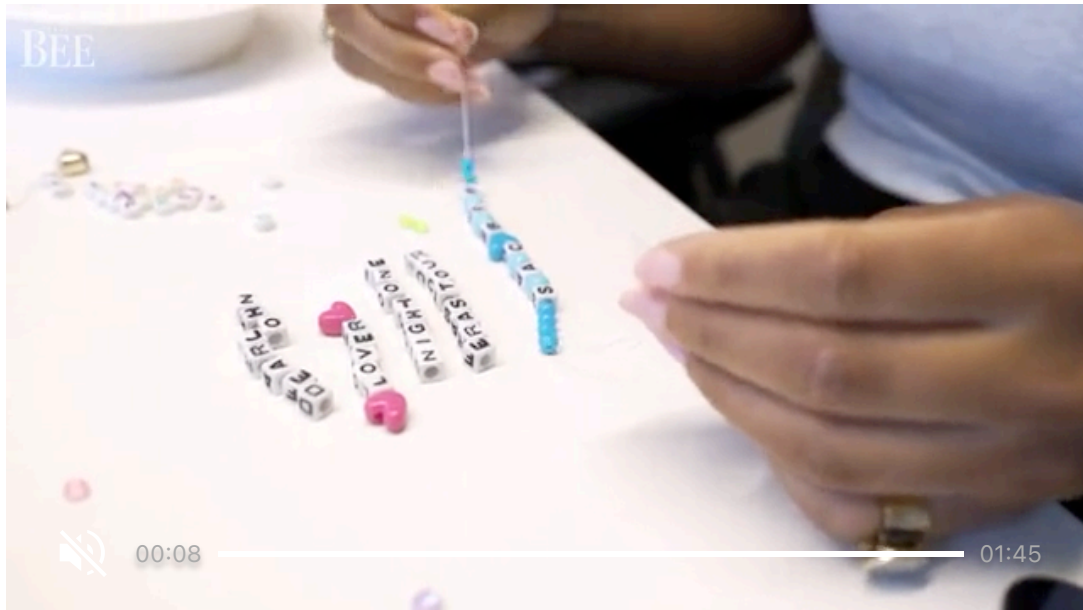
Greg Loe didn't have to look hard to figure out how E. coli probably got into this small town's drinking water supply.

In late May, a routine E. coli test came back positive. Loe, a Chico drinking water technician hired by the Butte City water district, raced to the Glenn County town to warn residents and investigate the cause. What he found, as described in court documents, could be a case study in how poor management can endanger the lives of those drinking tap water from any one of the 2,100 small water districts scattered across California.

Loe found cows grazing in the park where the town's barely-functioning well and pump were housed. The area around the well was muddy and littered with cow manure – a common source of E. coli fecal bacteria. The well's bacteria-killing chlorine pump was broken. A pipe had recently busted, cutting off water to the town. Someone had tracked in filth from the pasture when they entered the pump house to do the repairs.

“Mud and feces were tracked into the well shed,” Loe later wrote a declaration filed by state attorneys in Glenn County Superior Court. “I also found mud on pipes. The mud was from where the cows had been watering and defecating.”

TOP VIDEOS



See The Sacramento Bee make friendship bracelets for the Taylor Swift California concerts

The water district's board president, Jesus Campos, was the only person listed on emergency-contact forms to handle emergencies like these. But Loe said he was nowhere to be found. Loe alleged in court documents that Campos had gone on vacation and left his cell phone behind.

Luckily, no cases of E. coli infection were reported to the local health department. Loe flushed the water lines with potent chlorine and hooked up a temporary chlorination system. A boil-water order issued by the state was rescinded the next day after a follow-up E. coli test came back clean.

But officials at State Water Resources Control Board had seen enough. The E. coli scare was the latest in a string of problems at the Butte City Community Services District stretching back years. The district had been repeatedly cited – and failed to respond – to a pile of state drinking-water safety citations. The district also had been plagued by financial woes and political infighting. Five days before the E. coli

scare, sheriff's deputies were called to a raucous board meeting where residents had accused Campos of not answering residents' questions and allegedly stomping on a woman's foot. No charges were filed.

The water board asked a judge to let the state appoint a court-ordered receiver to run the troubled water system.

The judge shot down the request in August, siding with the water district's attorney who argued the state's concerns were overblown, that the district had fixed its problems, and that the voter-approved board should maintain local control.

"That water is safe, believe me," Campos said in an interview earlier this month. "I drink the water. I'm going to make sure the water is clean and safe."

The troubles at Butte City, while extreme, are just one example of a widespread problem. State water officials say California has too many small water utilities, and they account for the vast majority of the state's drinking-water violations.

California has around 3,000 community water systems. Of those, around 2,100 serve fewer than 500 homes. Some serve just as a handful of people. Almost 80 percent of the citations state regulators issue each year go to these little districts. State officials estimate that 300 economically disadvantaged California communities are served by a water system that doesn't meet standards for safe tap water.



[Database](#)

[1,741 DISTRICTS VIOLATED DRINKING WATER RULES IN 2016. DID YOU DRINK THEIR WATER?](#)

Many of the water districts are underfunded and understaffed. The most badly mismanaged of them are putting the communities they serve at risk.

“The smaller you are, the less resources you’re going to have, the less staffing you’re going to have, the less ability to respond (to an emergency), the more at risk those citizens that are relying on you become,” water board deputy director Darrin Polhemus said last month during a board presentation.

State water regulators point to a disaster in [Walkerton, Ontario](#) as an example of what can happen when something goes drastically awry at a small, mismanaged water district.

In 2000, the Canadian town’s well was overwhelmed by runoff from a nearby cattle operation. In a matter of days, more than 2,000 people were sickened by a particularly harmful strain of E. coli. Seven people died. Locals recount horrifying stories of entire elementary school classrooms filled with tiny students doubled over with bloody diarrhea. Some residents suffered permanent kidney damage. Others had vision problems from vomiting so hard it permanently damaged their eyeballs.

The utility serving 5,000 people was run by two brothers with no formal training. They were criminally convicted in a Canadian court for negligence.

‘OWNER, GOATS’

Nothing that horrific has ever come to pass in California, but regulators fear a disaster could be waiting to happen at the small, struggling water systems dotting California’s vast landscape.

In California, most of the small districts were founded decades ago when regulations weren’t stringent. Developers formed private water utilities to serve new subdivisions, trailer parks or small towns. Other times small public water districts were formed to manage drinking water systems.

Many of these, state officials say, are run by a single employee or even volunteers

tasked with the types of duties – drinking-water safety tests, emergency preparedness, billing, and legal issues – that are required of a well-funded municipal water district serving tens of thousands of people.

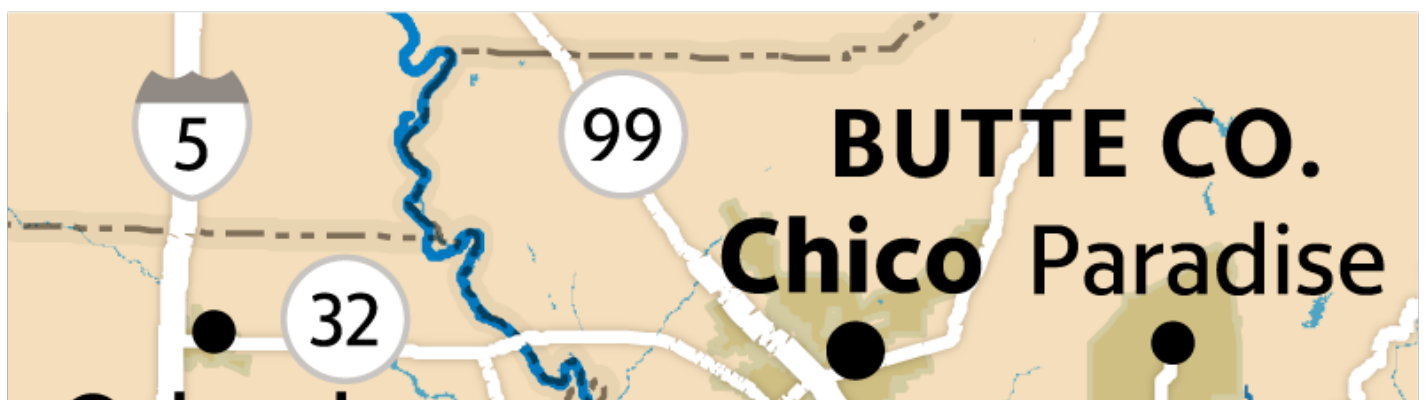
Not all districts are in trouble. Water board officials say most do the best they can with the little resources they have.

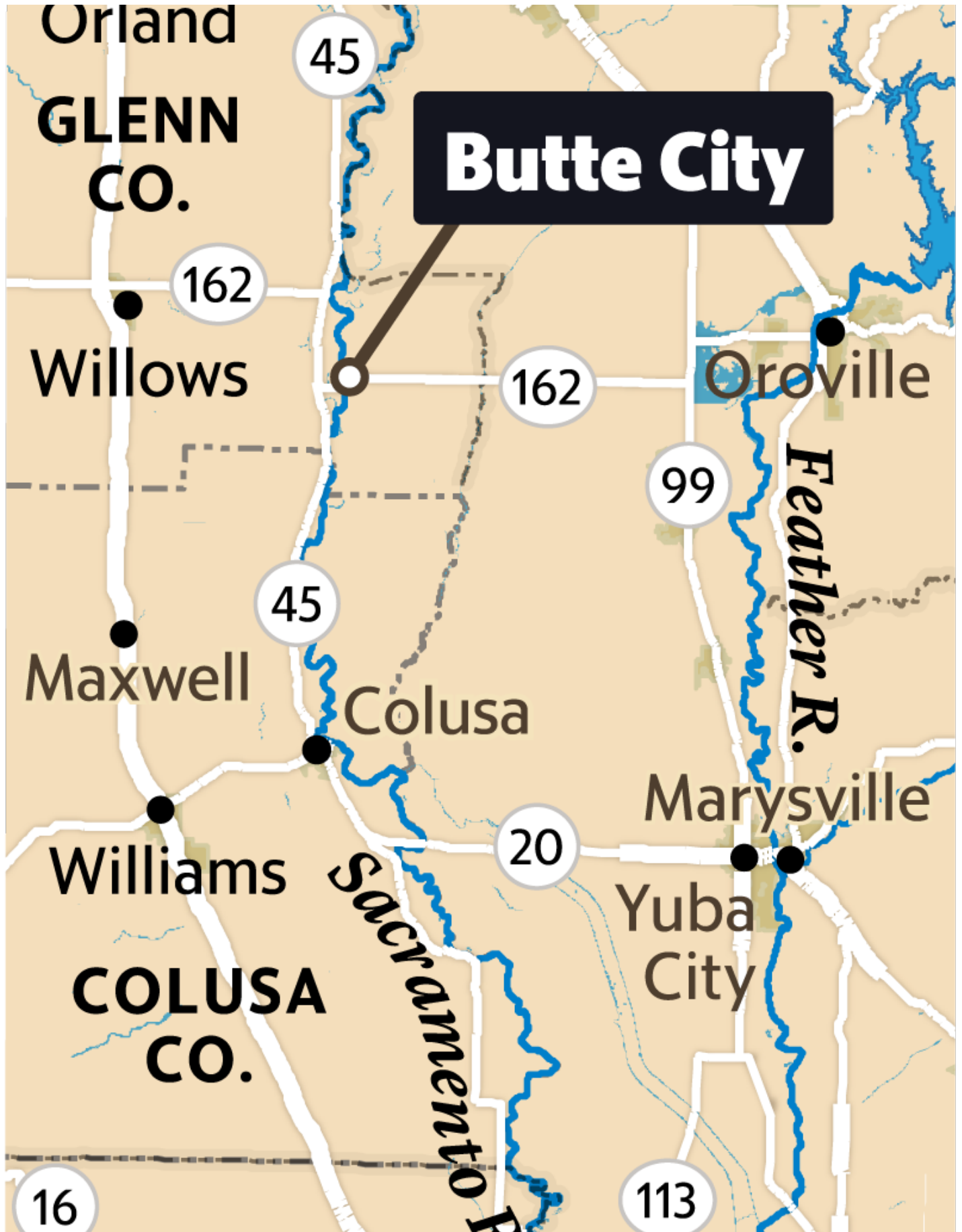
But to try to protect Californians from the sorts of problems seen in Butte City, the state water board – backed by a recently enacted state law – has embarked on an effort to consolidate more districts into larger, better-managed systems with more cash resources.

In 2015, [the legislature passed a bill championed by Gov. Jerry Brown](#) that gave the water board the authority to order a consolidation in certain cases. Grants and no-interest loans also are available to help districts navigate the complex, tedious process of consolidation.

So far this year, there have been 31 voluntary consolidations. Only one involuntary consolidation has been completed since the law was passed, but seven others are pending.

Not every district is a candidate for a consolidation, voluntary or otherwise. Water board officials say that's not really an option at Butte City, because it's too isolated.







The Sacramento Bee

That leaves the rare step of asking a judge to step in and appoint a state-monitored receiver when districts won't fix problems after being hit with sanctions from the water board.

Butte City is one of just five receivership cases the state has filed the past few years, according to the California Attorney General's Office, whose attorneys oversee the cases.

Butte City is surrounded by rice fields, walnut orchards and wildlife refuges on the eastern bank of the Sacramento River, 15 miles from Willows, Glenn County's seat. A sign greeting drivers as they enter town advertises "Ducks plucked here!" for the waterfowl hunters who pass through on hunting trips.

The town has a post office, a bar, a fire station and a few dozen tightly clustered homes. A small public park housing the troubled well sits at the southern edge of town. Earlier this month, the park was filled with four-foot tall weeds, and it looked as if no one had visited its play area and picnic tables in months. The park is maintained by the Butte City Community Services District, which also provides water to around 40 homes and about 100 people.

The district only has three people on its elected board, including Campos, the president. They're elected to four-year terms. Two other seats are vacant. The district is funded through residential water bills and property taxes. Aside from board members, the district has no employees, residents say.

Campos lives across the street from the park in an old motel whose rooms are rented out to long-term residents. Behind the motel earlier this month was a small lot where two cows and a couple of goats lounged. A hand-painted “Campos for Supervisor” sign was propped up against one of the fences inside the pen.

A neighbor said these were the cows that had been grazing in the town’s park during the E. coli scare. Loe, the drinking-water consultant, wrote in his court filing that someone had connected a hose from the town’s well to a cattle trough used by the cows for drinking.

Campos said in his interview with The Bee he didn’t know who put the cattle in the park. He said they weren’t his.

“I’m not here all the time. Dogs get in there. People get in there,” Campos said when asked who put the cows in the park.

Campos is listed as “owner, goats” in two sheriff’s office incident reports that deputies filed after residents had arguments with Campos around the time of the water shutoff and E. coli scare.

‘RANDOM INCIDENTS?’

In a rambling interview, Campos said the town’s residents, county supervisors, even Loe, the district’s contracted drinking-water technician, were out to get him. Campos said the district has spent close to \$20,000 in attorney’s fees fighting the receivership case, which he described as a coup led by people from out of town who had bought vacation homes.

Some people, he said, didn't like him because he was Hispanic. He said someone damaged the well to spite him. (According to a sheriff's office report, some residents accused Campos of damaging the well – a claim deputies couldn't substantiate.)

Campos said he's doing the best he can to maintain the district with the limited resources it has available.

"It's very difficult not having any money for infrastructure, for workers," he said. "The judge saw that we're making a very good effort to do the best thing we can with the resources we have." He said he's seeking state funds to help.

But Butte City resident Joe Regoli said he and his neighbors are frustrated not just by the E. coli scare, but also with how the district is spending its money under Campos' leadership, which began four years earlier. Regoli is one of eight candidates who've filed papers to run for the district's two open seats and to challenge Campos, who's up for reelection.

Regoli said the district had a budget surplus before Campos took it over, but he's been draining its funds.

"It's a disgrace what he's done," he said.

One particular district expense is raising eyebrows in town. The district paid Bogart Construction, an Orland "general engineering" firm, \$5,557 in June to mow the park and for "clean up," according an invoice obtained by The Bee. Regoli said the park had only been mowed once, a job that took four hours. The park is just two acres.

"The grass was tall. Very tall," Campos said. "You can't mow it with a regular lawn mower."

The construction company couldn't be reached for comment. The number listed on [its state contractor's license](#) was disconnected last week.

The financial irregularities played a role in the state's drinking water receivership case. The state alleged in court documents the district was hemorrhaging funds as it failed to respond to water board citations. Those included disregarding orders to repair its barely functional main well where Loe found the cow feces, and for failing to disconnect a broken, "bacteriologically compromised" second well from the town's drinking-water system.

The district also ignored repeated citations for violating state water-quality testing and reporting requirements, including for potentially harmful heavy metals such as lead.

State officials noted the board had been dinged repeatedly since 2012 by the Glenn County Grand Jury for financial, infrastructure and management problems.

"You could see the poor governance," said Bruce Burton, assistant deputy director for the State Water Resources Control Board's drinking-water division.

Making matters more urgent: in late July another test came back positive for fecal coliform bacteria, according to state filings.

It wasn't enough to sway Glenn County Superior Court judge Peter B. Twede. Court documents don't say why he denied the state's request to appoint a receiver, but the district's Sacramento attorney, Eli Underwood, said board members never received many of the citations the state water board issued because a disgruntled former employee destroyed them. Underwood also alleged the water board made little effort to discuss the problems directly with Campos and the district.

As for the problems at the town's only functioning well in May? That was just a bad-luck combination of a power outage and some random vandalism, Underwood wrote in court papers.

"The recent random incidents are not evidence of a greater failing, but simply the random episodes they appear to be," Underwood wrote. Underwood argued "deposing a democratically-elected board" by appointing a receiver to run the district would add further strife to the economically disadvantaged community.

Underwood told the judge the district was hiring a new drinking-water technician to replace Loe, who quit in July in frustration. Loe wrote in court documents that he resigned after Campos refused to pay him in a timely manner. Loe declined to be interviewed.

Burton said the water board is going to keep a close watch on Butte City, and it will move to have the receivership case reopened if the system is again compromised. He's hopeful the town's voters will make a change in November, because he's doubtful the district will turn itself around otherwise.

"People don't usually change overnight," Burton said.

Ryan Sabalow: [916-321-1264](tel:916-321-1264), [@ryansabalow](https://twitter.com/ryansabalow)

This reporting was supported by a fellowship from the Institute for Journalism & Natural Resources.

This story was originally published September 22, 2017, 9:07 AM.

Take Us With You

Real-time updates and all local stories you want right in the palm of your hand.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Start a
Subscription

LEARN MORE

About Us

ADVERTISING

McClatchy
Advertising

[THE SACRAMENTO BEE APP →](#)

[VIEW NEWSLETTERS →](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[eEdition](#)

[Vacation Hold](#)

[Pay Your Bill](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Archives](#)

[Sports](#)

[Betting](#)

[Personal](#)

[Finance](#)

[Place an Ad](#)

[Place a Classified Ad](#)

[Place an Obituary](#)

[Staffing Solutions](#)

[Political | Advocacy Advertising](#)

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[COMMENTING POLICY](#)

[CORRECTIONS POLICY](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[YOUR PRIVACY CHOICES](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)