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The Price for Building a Home in This Town: \$300,000 Water Meter

By **FRED A. BERNSTEIN**

BOLINAS, Calif. — Marc Dwaileebe would like to build a house for his family on land he owns in this bucolic town just 20 miles north of San Francisco. But he cannot hook up to the water main that runs right past his property unless he has a water meter. And a water meter, in Bolinas, could cost more than \$300,000.

That is the minimum bid for a meter being auctioned off through Friday. The auction is the unlikely result of a water meter moratorium imposed by antidevelopment forces here in 1971.

For most of the last 39 years, “the only way a water meter came free was when a house burnt down, or fell off a cliff,” said Barbara Rothwell, a longtime Bolinas resident.

The meter moratorium has survived, even through protracted litigation, with the support of residents who like this isolated town the way it is.

The meter being auctioned belonged to a lot in the center of town that came on the market last year. The civic-minded community rushed to buy the property and maintain it as a park, with \$1.5 million donated by a billionaire venture capitalist. That freed up the meter, which is being sold by the park authority. The meter — and with it the chance to build a house — can be transferred to almost any lot in town, which makes it so valuable: a plumbing fixture as holy grail. Sealed bids for the meter are being accepted until Friday.

When a water meter was auctioned in 2005, a stonemason paid \$310,000. This meter could bring far more.

As long as the moratorium remains, “they’ll just get more and more valuable,” said James Kirkham, who has been spending time in Bolinas since the 1950s. Mr. Kirkham thinks the water meter may be undervalued.

If it does not bring big money, some residents may be secretly relieved, taking it as a sign that the relentless development pressures of the last decade have receded.

The seaside town is a 1960s time capsule. Outside the Bolinas People’s Store, used clothes are left for the taking in a shed known as the Free Box (the actress [Frances McDormand](#) has been known to stop by to fold items, many of them tie-dyed).

A lot near the People's Store became vacant back in 1974, when a restaurant called Tarantino's burned to the ground. Typically for Bolinas, nothing was built in its place, and the lot evolved into a lawn that locals call Burnt Park.

When the owners of the lot decided to put it on the market last year, Michael Moritz, who helped finance start-ups like Google, YouTube and PayPal, gave the park authority the money. It was one Bolinas organization that had not given him a hard time during his struggle to build a house on the outskirts of town — an approval process more tortuous than the roads that connect Bolinas to the outside world. The money from the meter auction (which is being conducted by a local real estate broker, Flower Fraser) will go toward landscaping the new park with plants that — naturally — will not require irrigation.

The people who need the meter most might not be able to afford it. At least one local resident has been tapping into a neighbor's hookup, an arrangement that has been an open secret for years. Mr. Dwaileebe does not have \$300,000 for a meter, said his lawyer, Riley Hurd. Instead, Mr. Dwaileebe is trying to convert an agricultural well on his property to domestic use, a process fraught with its own legal complications.

Outsiders are welcome to bid on the meter — if they can find Bolinas. For years, residents were famous for taking down signs pointing to the town, until the state relented and stopped putting up new ones. Even now, a sign that should say "Entering Bolinas" says, "Entering a socially acknowledged nature-loving town."

The water meter moratorium was imposed under an interpretation of state law that allows for restrictions on water hookups in an emergency. In 1971, an oil spill offshore left thousands of native birds coated in oil. Outsiders came to help with the cleanup — and in many cases stayed in the idyllic town. The newcomers gained a majority on the public utility board and imposed the moratorium on their first day in office, freezing the number of water meters at precisely 580.

But was there ever really a water emergency? In 1982, the Pacific Legal Foundation in Sacramento filed suit, claiming the moratorium on meters was simply an effort to keep outsiders from building. The suit dragged on for years, and cost this town of 1,500 almost \$2 million to defend.

When people hear about the shortage of water meters, "they often think it's a ruse," said Jack Siedman, a 33-year resident and a member of the public utility community board, who sports a graying ponytail under his straw hat.

"It's not a ruse, man," Mr. Siedman said. "We're hurting."

To prove his point, he escorted a reporter on a hike to the city's water source, a narrow creek known as Arroyo Hondo. A tiny dam holds back the creek, from which the town's water enters a pipe no wider than a coffee mug.

“That’s it,” he says, pointing to the creek and the pipe. “The entire water supply for Bolinas.”

Mr. Kirkham, enjoying breakfast recently at the town’s one restaurant, the Coast Cafe, says he is a conservative who still feels comfortable in Bolinas, where tie-dyes and dreadlocks are practically de rigueur.

“It’s a nice place to be whoever you want to be,” he said.

He added, “As long as you can get a water meter.”