

TO: Sebastopol City Councilmembers

Mayor Neysa Hinton, Vice Mayor Diana Rich, Sandra Maurer, Jill McLewis, and Stephen Zollman

FROM: Patricia Dines

Editor & Lead Writer of The Next STEP newsletter (“Your handy guide to less-toxic living “)

DATE: June 19, 2023

RE: STEP Newsletter — Counter-proposal for its budget and future

Dear City Councilmembers —

I’m a professional writer and graphic artist. And **I’ve been the Editor & Lead Writer of *The Next STEP* newsletter for 23+ years, since 2000 when STEP was established by the Sebastopol City Council and co-created with community members.**

I’ve been delighted to help manifest the Council’s vision with this City/Community collaborative project — to help reduce our town’s shared everyday toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier water supply and city for everyone.

I’m writing to respond to the proposed STEP budget that you’ll be reviewing at the June 20 City Council meeting. The Budget Committee is proposing drastic cuts to the STEP newsletter project **that I feel would gut the core outreach structure of this project.** I really don’t see how the STEP project would make any sense if it were just online.

Instead of their proposed cuts of 85% of fixed costs and elimination of added staff time, **I’m offering a counter-proposal that would trim hard costs 40% and largely eliminate staff time, but keep the core essence of this project.** **This would be done by shifting STEP from six issues a year to four.** Plus I’d also take on moving the annual reader feedback process online.

I hope that you will choose my proposal in your budget, so that this innovative and valued community project can continue helping protect our water supply and citizens from everyday toxics. I welcome any questions or requests that you might have. **I’ve also included here another idea to save notably more money than the STEP program costs.**

Best regards — Patricia Dines

BACKGROUND. For 23+ years, I’ve created final print-ready editions of the STEP newsletter for the City to **distribute in its water bills.** I’ve also maintained an announcement email list and online topic Index, and done promotion of the project at events. **I’ve done all this on a volunteer basis** because I value and was inspired by the City Council’s vision of using voluntary education at a city-level to reduce our collective use and exposure to everyday toxics.

The City’s role has been to annually distribute six issues of the printed STEP newsletter in the City water bills, distribute the annual printed feedback cards, and compile the feedback results.

I’ve been delighted that the STEP newsletter has consistently gotten a reader approval rating of 85-90%+ in our annual survey. And pleased that readers consistently report that they’ve reduced their use of toxics — and increased their understanding of toxic issues — as a result of reading our newsletter. And that they share this information with others.

CURRENT BUDGET COMMITTEE PROPOSAL. The City Budget Committee, without anyone discussing it with me, has proposed drastic cuts that I feel would gut the core of the STEP project. They propose **eliminating the key outreach distribution of the print STEP editions in City water bills, and putting the newsletter online instead.** This would cut STEP’s entire annual print and distribution budget of \$3,320, and apparently the 10-15 hours annually of staff time. Only \$500 would be allocated for the City to do an annual online reader survey with SurveyMonkey.

MY RESPONSE TO THIS BUDGET COMMITTEE PROPOSAL. I understand and empathize with the City’s budget challenges. **However I strongly disagree with this approach for these reasons.**

- 1) The STEP budget has always already been lean,** because the newsletter is created by volunteers, and piggybacks on the postage of existing water bills. STEP is already a low-cost bargain — with a high-community benefit!
- 2) This change would undermine the very essence of STEP’s design and strategy as a community outreach program.** Its innovative goal has been to reach out to *everyone* in Sebastopol — to reduce our *shared* toxic use and exposure. **We especially want to reach people who use toxics and don’t know the risks and/or won’t go looking for information about alternatives!** Plus it’s a tangible reminder of our shared commitment to a safer Sebastopol. And having the paper edition makes it easy for people to put it on the fridge, share it with others, and save it for future projects.
- 3) If the newsletter were instead just on the website and one reference of many in the City newsletter, it’d easily get missed and greatly reduce its connection and impact on city resident actions.** Plus not everyone is online or has easy

access to email and the Internet (the “digital divide”). And we’re all overwhelmed by email. Distributing the printed newsletter in the water bill has helped it get people’s attention so they actually use the information, to benefit us all.

4) If STEP were just on the City website, it would have to become something else. It wouldn’t be outreach. What would be the purpose of having it as a City project? Would there be a point to making PDF files? How would it be differentiated from other online resources? Why would it exist?

5) Because this would gut the program, I doubt that I’d continue offering my unpaid services to this project.

6) However, instead of the Budget Committee’s proposed cuts of 85% of fixed costs and elimination of additional staff time, I’m offering you a counter-proposal that would still reduce hard costs 40%, and largely eliminate staff time, but retain the core essence of this project. This would be done by shifting STEP from six issues a year to four (quarterly). Plus I’d also do the work of moving and managing the annual reader feedback process online.

MATH SPECIFICS

1) CURRENT BUDGET

- **ANNUAL CITY COST: \$3,320 for outside mailing company** to print, fold, and insert **six** STEP issues into City water bills, and to print and insert the annual feedback cards.
- **10 to 15 hours by City staff** to work on STEP-related tasks.
- **\$0** For professional writing, editing, graphic arts, and website services by Patricia Dines, saving the City lots of money!
- **\$0** For support by other community members, including Jim Gleaves on the Editorial Team.

2) BUDGET COMMITTEE’S PROPOSED BUDGET

- **ANNUAL CITY COST: \$500 for online survey** with SurveyMonkey, including fixed and staff costs.
- **\$0** For professional writing, editing, graphic arts, and website services by Patricia Dines.
- **\$0** For support by other community members.

3) PATRICIA DINES’ PROPOSED BUDGET (with cost figures provided by Ana Kwong)

- **ANNUAL CITY COST: \$2,000** for outside mailing company to print, fold, and insert **four** STEP issues into City water bills. No printing, mailing or tabulating of annual feedback cards. That’s a 40% reduction of this fixed cost.
- **0 to 1 hour annually for City staff** to read print-ready newsletter and forward to printer. A 90-96% reduction in costs.
- **\$0** For professional writing, editing, graphic arts, and website services by Patricia Dines. **Additionally, I’d take on creating and managing the online annual reader survey.**
- **\$0** For support by other community members.

KEY POINTS

- 1) STEP is a low-cost, high-value, innovative community benefit project that helps protect the City’s water supply and residents’ health.** It’s a win/win/win for City government, residents, and our shared environment and water supply.
- 2) STEP was created as an innovative solution to a very serious modern problem: The fact that everyday toxics are shown to move from their point of use into our water supply, air, earth, food, and bodies.** Our often involuntary cumulative exposure to these toxics has been shown to increase the risk of health harm to ourselves and our families, pets, ecosystems, and more. **The STEP newsletter has demonstrated the good news that friendly and helpful outreach education can help reduce that harm and better protect our community from these toxics.**
- 3) STEP can continue if it’s allocated just \$2,000 a year.**
- 4) Also, if it’s helpful, I think that STEP used to be in the Water budget, because one goal was to help protect the water supply.** I don’t think that it’s still there. Would it be useful to return it to that budget?
- 5) If you choose not to accept my proposal, I ask that there be budget for me to do one last print newsletter in the water bills,** to let folks know the news, and to respect my relationship with the town’s residents and my 23+ years of service. I also ask that the project be permanently archived on the City website.

ADDITIONAL RELATED BUDGET SAVINGS QUESTION AND OPPORTUNITY, WATER BILL COSTS

I’ve also recently learned that City staff is planning to start having the water bill mailed monthly once the smart water meters are fully installed, which is expected to be later this year. (Right now, the water bills are bi-monthly, with bills being calculated and sent to half the town each month.)

I found this plan surprising, in light of the City's budget crisis. It seems to me that this would double the printing and postage costs for the water bills. How much would that increase costs? \$10,000? It seems that these increased costs would be thousands more than could be saved by gutting the STEP program.

I asked Administrative Services Director Ana Kwong if any financial analysis had been done of this change, and she didn't provide me with this information. She said maybe it was somewhere in the 2021 discussion about installing the smart water meters.

She said the reason for this change was to provide residents with more frequent information on their water usage. But is monthly vs. bi-monthly information really the fiscal priority now? Is it worth the costs of doubling the billing frequency? And can't the smart meters offer that kind of information, for those who want it?

It seems that this change and cost increase should be reconsidered in this current public budget conversation. Perhaps deciding not to make this change could save the City many thousands of dollars! It seems at least prudent to require a cost estimate and Council approval before it proceeds.

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, THE MOST RECENT LETTERS SENT 6/19/23 TO THE CITY COUNCIL RE: THE STEP PROPOSAL

RE: proposed budget cuts

I will be brief. When looking at difficult decisions and considerations with proposed budget cuts for our home city of Sebastopol, please consider the following.

1) I live within the city limits of Sebastopol and I do not support proposed budget cuts for volunteer fire dept. stipends distributed to our Sebastopol volunteers.

2) **I am an advocate of keeping the paper copies of the informational STEP newsletter as a true outreach for busy citizens.**

Sebastopol residents are counting on you to hear and represent us. Thank you for your work.

Sincerely, Patti Koepf [REDACTED] Sebastopol, CA 95472

RE: Please continue print version of STEP Newsletter

Dear Sebastopol Council,

I am a Sebastopol resident and I support keeping the STEP newsletter in paper format. I understand that Sebastopol needs to make budget cuts, however, it hardly seems worth it to slash the budget of a program that is already extremely cost effective, being mostly run by volunteers with free (!!) content that is professional, well researched, and tailored specifically to the needs of our community. **STEP is a gem and the program should not be downplayed or devalued by the city.**

I believe that this proposed city action could be the end of STEP. An online-only newsletter will drastically cut the circulation. I imagine it could be difficult to maintain the existing volunteer team if the city takes away the newsletter's existing impact. Sebastopol made a commitment to toxic free neighborhoods decades before it was in vogue. If there were to be any changes with STEP, I would want them to be more in the direction of elevating the platform and putting resources toward expanding readership, even putting resources toward making it easier to look up information from archived newsletters. I have even envisioned that this content could be brought/sold to other cities in the county that are now following Sebastopol's lead toward reducing toxic exposure by banning chemicals like pesticides, for example.

I agree that a discussion to revamp the STEP program may be in order, **but a decision to cut the paper newsletters with no further thought or analysis is not the right approach.** If you are interested in having a future discussion on the future of the STEP program, I would be glad to be a part of that process.

Megan Kaun [REDACTED] Sebastopol, CA

Director, Sonoma Safe Ag Safe Schools/www.SonomaSASS.org

Re: STEP Newsletter - please continue printed format in water bills!

I am writing to support the excellent and important STEP newsletter. Please continue to include the printed newsletter in the Sebastopol water bills. I also ask that you support the proposal offered by Editor & Lead Writer Patricia Dines. Her approach will keep this essential part of the STEP program while cutting costs by 40% and essentially eliminating the 10 to 15 staff hours for this project.

The original vision for STEP, when it was created by the Sebastopol City Council in 2000, was to do educational outreach to the entire community. I joined the STEP editorial team in 2006, and have been grateful and honored to help implement this vision. **STEP is a powerful tool for city residents, providing well-informed, relevant, and inspiring information that aids in eliminating our daily use and exposure to toxic substances.**

A printed newsletter has key advantages over an online version. First, it reaches every home that gets a water bill. This includes people who would not know that the online version exists, or even think about searching for it. Second, people pay more attention to physical mail, so the information is more likely to be noticed. Third, a physical newsletter can be kept and shared more easily within a household. This old-school method of communication has significantly more impact and reach than a digital version.

The printed newsletter has been created entirely by volunteers such as myself. It is an incredible bargain for the City. It has an 85-90%+ approval rating every year. And people repeatedly tell us that they appreciate and use this information to notably reduce their use of toxics, and share it with others. Local people I do not know at CVS and my dentist have recognized my name and thanked me for participating in the newsletter.

I know you are doing your best to make good decisions for Sebastopol. As the City website mentions, "We're a very special city . . . because we enjoy the active participation of citizens interested in improving our excellent quality of life." **Please stay true to the original City Council vision of a printed newsletter created by volunteers to reach out to all the community.**

Jim Gleaves