

# Loma Prieta memories should remind of Delta's peril

**John Laird, Bay Area Newspaper Group, 10-16-16**

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Twenty-seven years ago, on Oct. 17, 1989, I was a City Council member going about my normal business in Santa Cruz. I returned home in time for game three of the Giants v A's World Series. As I settled in, the TV jumped at me. A 6.9 earthquake centered about ten miles away was shaking the region.

I ran out through the kitchen as dishes pitched out of the cupboards. Outside I couldn't take my eyes off a neighbor's palm tree as it waved almost to the ground. Eventually, I made my way to City Hall at the edge of our decimated downtown. I rode with the city manager to the emergency center, passing through a neighborhood being evacuated because of a major gas leak.

By radio, we heard that 70 miles to the north a freeway had collapsed, the Marina neighborhood was burning, and a piece of the Bay Bridge was down.

The Loma Prieta earthquake was responsible for 63 deaths, 3,757 injuries and an estimated \$6 to \$10 billion in property damage. In Santa Cruz County alone, unemployment quadrupled within a few days and statewide, an estimated 7,000 people lost their jobs.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of another large earthquake is growing. The most recent study from the U.S. Geological Survey found a 72 percent probability of a 6.7 or greater magnitude earthquake striking the San Francisco Bay Area before 2043, with the odds of a major earthquake rising each year we don't have one.

Since Loma Prieta, the Bay Area has spent more than \$22 billion on infrastructure upgrades. But much more needs to be done – especially when it comes to protecting one of the state's largest supplies of clean water.

Roughly 70 percent of the Bay Area's water supply comes from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta or its tributaries. A third of the Southern California's water supply, on average, comes from the Delta. The State Water Project, centered in the Delta, provides water to districts serving twenty-five million Californians – from the Silicon Valley to San Diego – and serves three million acres of irrigated agriculture.

In 2005, the governor signed a bill I authored as a state assemblyman that asked the California Department of Water Resources to evaluate the impacts of various disasters on the Delta.

The resulting report indicated that our Delta water infrastructure and the surrounding ecosystem are at serious risk. Some Delta levees are in danger of liquefying during an earthquake. There are 1,100 miles of levees holding back water from Delta islands and with many of these islands below sea level, salt water from the San Francisco Bay would drain into the Delta. This salt water contamination could render clean water supplies unusable. A strong earthquake could cause water outages for months or even years.

We must safeguard the water supplies that flow through the Delta with an upgrade to outdated and imperiled infrastructure. Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed California WaterFix would do that by moving water underground in seismically safe, flood-proof tunnels. If disaster were to strike the central Delta, enough water to meet basic health and safety needs could still be delivered to the millions of people who depend on it.

On the anniversary of Loma Prieta, we should remind ourselves that we can either act through leadership or crisis. California has the opportunity to lead the way in preparing for the future. The governor's proposal is a

necessary insurance against such ground-shaking disasters. In California, it's not if the next earthquake happens, but when. We must be ready.