

Doug Vagim makes history with water campaign

Posted by George Hostetter on April 9, 2014

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Doug Vagim and his allies in the fight against Fresno's higher water rates have done something remarkable. They have convinced both major political parties — the county's Democratic and Republican central committees — to support their efforts to put the issue before voters.

Democrats and Republicans don't often see things the same way. But both have embraced Vagim.

Vagim in an email to The Bee said he and his team are currently asking voters to sign a referendum petition. "Signature gathering is going great," he said.

Vagim said the stand taken by the Republicans and Democrats "shows the members of the Central Committees of our two major political party's have a better understanding of the principles of democracy than does our Mayor and certain members of the Fresno City Council."

Vagim identified what may become the central issue should Measure W get on the ballot this year — What are the principles of democracy?

As to whether Fresno's commercial and residential ratepayers should pay for a \$410 million upgrade to the city's water system, well, I'm guessing that's not a matter to be decided once and for all by voters. Municipal water systems, especially here in the West, were nationalized long ago. In the end, the feds simply aren't going to let Fresno's water system fall below their standards. I don't know what those standards are. I just know they will prevail. Home water meters proved that.

But I do find it fascinating that two organizations designed specifically for the purpose of creating an effective mechanism to channel the people's sovereignty into a dynamic yet prudent representative government would voluntarily decide their reason for existence is illegitimate.

How did that come to be? The Measure W campaign will give us answers.

There are many forms of democracy. What we're talking about here is Fresno moving toward a plebiscitary democracy — the people, not their elected representatives, decide specific government policy at the ballot box.

That's what Fresno did with last June's Measure G — who should pick up the city's garbage?

That's what Fresno will do with Measure W — do we need new water pipes and a surface water treatment plant?

The local Democratic Party has decided to go the route of plebiscitary democracy, even though Council Members Blong Xiong and Oliver Baines have already voted for the higher water rates. The Democrats recently endorsed Xiong in his race for Fresno County supervisor and Baines in his re-election bid. There's got to be a reason that explains why the Democrats want to delegitimize the authority of Xiong and Baines as council members, then want to send them back to elected positions that, in a plebiscitary democracy, would be stripped of authority. I just don't know what that reason is. Measure W will give the local Democratic Party an opportunity to explain at length.

The local Republican Party has decided to go the route of plebiscitary democracy, even though the very essence of Republican/conservative philosophy since the days of Lincoln and Hamilton has been the conviction that man's nature is immutable — he is flawed — and therefore the society of men and women must be governed by a system of checks and balances that prevents the majority from turning into a mob. There's got to be a reason that explains why the Republicans want to delegitimize the system of local checks and balances that includes Council Members Steve Brandau and Lee Brand, both of whom voted for the higher water rates. I just don't know what that reason is. Measure W will give the local Republican Party an opportunity to explain at length.

The notion of “plebiscitary democracy” is usually thrown around by one party or another when the political winds aren't blowing their way. But now we've got both major parties embracing the idea at Fresno City Hall.

Doug Vagim and his Measure W allies did it. That's one for the history books.