

Video: <http://abclocal.go.com/kfsn/story?section=news/local&id=9513014>

Judge issues tentative order in fight over Fresno water rate hikes

FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- The push to repeal Fresno's recent water rate increase has passed another hurdle. On Tuesday a judge tentatively ruled in favor of a group fighting to put a measure on the November ballot.

People are already paying more for their water after the first rate hike went into effect last September. The city said the increase is needed to fund a \$410 million upgrade to its water system, but some believe voters should have the last word.

"We had 110 days taken away from us to be able to qualify this for us for the ballot so we have a shortened time to do it and we are going to do it, said former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim.

Vagim is leading the initiative dubbed Measure W. He believes it should be up to voters to decide whether to pay more for their water and said he's already collected most of the signatures required to make it on the ballot.

"We plan to turn in around 6,000 to make the 4,800, 4,829 signatures will qualify it," he added.

The hikes approved last year, will eventually double water bills over the next three years from an average of \$24.49 a month to \$48.34. Money the city insists is necessary to replace old and worn out infrastructure and to fund a new treatment plant.

If the judge's final decision doesn't change, city attorney Doug Sloan said Fresno will continue to fight the issue.

"We believe this type of initiative is not legal, because the city is required to supply water and therefore you can't put that on the ballot and there are court decisions that say that," said Sloan.

Vagim and his supporters also refused to give up.

"When we get done with the process here and we can actually discuss it like adults instead of have it sneak through and passed in two weeks and basically have the city of Fresno sue its citizens for exercising our constitutional right," said Steve Wayte.

The judge said he'll submit his final decision in writing in the next week. In the meantime, Vagim plans to collect the rest of the signatures he needs by mid-May so they can be counted and verified by the August deadline.