

# EDITORIAL: Fresno should take a second look at water rates

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The Fresno Bee Editorial Board



The Fresno City Council should take a new look at the cost of the proposed water-treatment plant and scaling back on other improvements to lessen the impact of water rate increases.

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Democracy in a charter city such as Fresno is often messy. The latest example of that fact is the success of a Doug Vagim-led petition drive that could give voters the opportunity to accept or reject increased water rates intended for water-infrastructure upgrades approved by the Fresno City Council.

The hikes are substantial. George Hostetter, who covers City Hall for The Bee, has written that a typical water bill that was \$24.49 last year would nearly double by summer 2016.

Nor are Fresnoans alone in scrutinizing escalating water bills. Last month, voters in Davis, by a 51% to 49% margin, repealed rate hikes tied to a joint project with the neighboring city of Woodland that would tap into the Sacramento River.

It's too early to tell if or when Fresno voters will cast ballots on the rate increases, as there are several options available to Mayor Ashley Swearengen and the City Council. As Hostetter reported today, the council could: 1) rescind the increases; 2) leave it to voters to decide "yea" or "nay"; 3) lower the sticker

shock of the escalating rates by 5% to 10%; or 4) continue their legal fight against Vagim and others.

We believe that Swearingin and the City Council are acting in Fresno's best interests with plans to build a \$227 million surface-water treatment plant in southeast Fresno and spend \$183 million more replacing old pipes and pumps, and building more recharge basins. The treatment plant is essential because it would allow the city to rely less on groundwater, thus protecting the aquifer below as Fresno's population grows.

Some of Fresno's prime assets are its aquifer, its yearly surface-water contracts and its embrace of recharging. Our city, with its network of recharge and flood-control basins and treatment facilities, long has been a model for other municipalities. Moreover, the projects planned by the city are vital to our economic future and the environment. Without an adequate supply of clean, safe and affordable drinking water, Fresno will fail to prosper.

All of that said, City Hall might have reached too far with the size of these rate increases. Though some households can easily absorb them — or afford to invest in water-saving technologies — many households will have to spend less on such things as groceries, clothing and transportation to pay their water bills.

We suggest that the City Council take a hard look at reducing the increases. This can be done by trimming the cost of the new water-treatment plant and scaling back or even delaying some of the other improvements.

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