


Fresno water rates measure gets enough signatures to get on ballot

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Former Fresno County supervisor Doug Vagim is leading a move to put the city's water rates to a vote, possibly in November..

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

The petition drive to put Fresno's higher water rates to a vote of the people has succeeded.

Now it's likely there will be plenty of politicking at City Hall this month before it's a lock on the November ballot. The City Council gets the next shot at water rates.

City Clerk Yvonne Spence said Tuesday that 5,544 valid registered voters signed the petitions, many more than the 4,829 needed.

Former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim, who has worked nearly a year on the referendum effort, said he's pleased.

"We've got the people behind us," Vagim said. "They're ready to have their voices heard."

But Council Member Lee Brand, who supports the higher rates, said there's time between now and November to educate voters on the higher rates' value.

"I think (Measure W) can be beaten," Brand said. "Then the people will have spoken."

Mayor Ashley Swearengin has said higher rates will build a system able to deliver clean water well into the 21st century. The city's director of communications, Mark Standriff, said it's time to settle "once and for all" whether the city has authority to do this.

Council Member Sal Quintero said he will support Vagim if the rates reach the ballot.

"My position is let's not do the increases all at once," Quintero said. "That's a big hit to a lot of our residents."

The signatures were verified by Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth and her staff. Spence said she will prepare a resolution identifying options for the City Council, probably for the July 17 meeting.

Option 1 is to rescind the higher rates and start over, negating a need for a citywide vote.

Option 2 is send the decision to voters, perhaps in the November general election.

Brand said a third option is floating around City Hall: Lower the rates by 5% or 10%.

Vagim said he doubts whether that's legal.

Vagim said he fears a fourth option: another city-initiated, time-consuming lawsuit of the kind that has marked recent events.

"Things could go in all sorts of directions," he said.

The City Council last August voted 5-2 (Quintero and Clint Olivier voting no) to raise the monthly rates on about 134,000 commercial and residential water customers. The rates would be raised annually. The typical monthly home water bill could (based on consumption) go from \$24.49 at the time to \$48.34 by mid-2016.

The extra money would pay for a \$410 million upgrade to the water system. The biggest project would be a \$227 million surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno (Quintero's district). There also would be new pipes in selected areas, new water wells where needed and better recharge basins to halt the decline in the city's water table.

The Measure W campaign would come a little more than a year after the divisive Measure G referendum on residential trash rates. The Measure G campaign was a complex affair, with both sides trotting out competing facts and projections for something as simple as collecting the weekly garbage.

Measure W, involving the resource that makes or breaks the Valley, figures to make Measure G look simple.

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