

EDITORIAL: Redraw Fresno water plans and soften the rate increases

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The Fresno Bee Editorial Board



Former Fresno County supervisor Doug Vagim is leading a move to put the recently approved water rate hike decision to a vote in next June's primary election. The Fresno City Council will be facing several tough questions on the issue today.

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Fresno City Council members face several tough questions today.

Should they continue a legal fight to try to stave off Doug Vagim's attempt at rolling back commercial and residential water-rate increases that will pay for a new \$227 million surface water treatment plant and other water infrastructure improvements?

Should they sign off on letting Fresno residents decide at the ballot box whether to rescind the rate hikes, which would double a typical monthly home water bill to \$48.34 by mid-2016?

Or should they put a sharper pencil to the treatment plant and other upgrades, and soften the severity of the increases?

As we understand both the economic challenges many Fresnoans face and the city's need to reduce pumping groundwater, we recommend that council members vote to scale back plans and reduce the rate increases.

If this step is taken, it will require the council to rescind the hikes, determine the new cost of the planned projects and subject the new proposed rates to Proposition 218 scrutiny. Proposition 218 was passed by California voters in 1996, and it requires cities to demonstrate that rates are valid and don't exceed the cost of providing services.

Frankly, we believe that Mayor Ashley Swearengin and the City Council didn't fully consider the negative impact that these sharp rate hikes would have on many Fresno residents and businesses.

But neither are we impressed by Vagim's campaign to prevent the city from investing in much-needed infrastructure vital to Fresno's economic future and quality of life.

As this historic drought has brought to the attention of Californians, we need a wide portfolio of tools to better manage, move and conserve the precious water that is stored in aquifers below us and that which comes tumbling out of the Sierra and its snowpack every spring.

This means more water storage (above and below ground), new water-delivery systems and a pledge by every California to cut down on water consumption. In Fresno, this also means meeting future demands created by a growing population and economy by spending wisely on our city's water system.

Some City Council members might be eager to have a showdown with Vagim, a former Fresno County supervisor, at the ballot box. Others may want to surrender to populist cries of "Let the voters speak" or prefer paying lawyers in hope of a legal decision that keeps the rate increases in place.

We believe that the right choice is to redraw the plans and pare the rate increases. With that decision, ratepayers win, the city wins and even Vagim wins.

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