

Fresno City Council to debate water rates and Measure W

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By George Hostetter

Water issues amid a historic drought will be front and center at Thursday's Fresno City Council meeting.

The questions include:

Will the council repeal big hikes to water rates and avoid a divisive election in November?

What will the council say about new landscape watering regulations set to go live on Friday?

Is the council keen on giving Fresnoans new powers to bring neighborhood code violators to justice?

They're all connected, but it's the first one that keeps council members awake at night.

The council last summer approved a series of rate hikes that would double the typical single-family home's monthly water bill to about \$48 by mid-2016. Mayor Ashley Swearengin wants to fund a \$410 million upgrade to a water system deemed too creaky for a big city in a semi-arid region.

Former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim said the project, particularly its \$227 million surface water treatment plant, is too big and expensive. He and his allies got enough voter signatures to put the rates to a vote of the people -- Measure W.

Vagim wants city officials to repeal the rates and start over.

The council at 3 p.m. Thursday will consider two options: Repeal or put the matter before voters in the Nov. 4 election.

"I've never been this undecided 24 hours before a vote," Council President Steve Brandau, who voted for the higher rates in 2013, said Wednesday.

Council Member Clint Olivier said he's focused on city needs and ratepayer pocketbooks.

"I believe the water infrastructure is desperately needed," said Olivier, who, with Council Member Sal Quintero, cast the only votes against higher rates. "But I want to make sure any increase to rates is within the ballpark of what my constituents can bear."

City Manager Bruce Rudd won't tell the council what to do, but does emphasize the aging infrastructure and dropping groundwater levels.

"At some point in time," Rudd said, "we, as a community, need to accept this reality and move forward with taking the necessary steps to provide a safe, reliable water supply for our families and our future."

The council action is subject to mayoral veto.

The city's position always circles back to the same point:

Fresno has contracts for immense amounts of water from the San Joaquin and Kings rivers. That water,

available in most years, comes in a rush when the weather turns hot. Fresno has a system to use and store (in the aquifer) some of that water, but not all. An improved system can be built at a relatively modest cost. Common sense says Fresno should act sooner rather than later.

Vagim also returns to a concise point:

The surface water treatment plant is the project's centerpiece. It'll be built in southeast Fresno. That's where city officials see dramatic growth in the next 25 to 50 years. Go ahead and build the plant -- but make developers, not ratepayers living far from that area, foot the bill.

Making water rules and sticking to them

This is where the other two water-related issues percolating through City Hall come to the surface.

City leaders are mulling many variables on Measure W. For instance, Swearingin is running for state controller. Does she want a bruising campaign like last year's Measure G/residential trash initiative at the same time she's trying to become that rare Republican who wins a statewide office in California?

Another variable is time.

City officials can't do anything about Vagim. But the city remains in control of water regulations. These turned even more strict when city officials last week said Fresnoans may water their yards only two days a week rather than the current three. These rules go into effect on Friday.

City officials made three key points during the announcement:

Fresnoans are encouraged to contact City Hall when they see someone (including the city) breaking the rules or wasting water. Violators get an initial warning, then face a potential \$45 per day fine. Citizens, in essence, are being asked to help enforce city code.

The need for better conservation won't go away soon.

Improved infrastructure could lead to better water supplies that lighten the regulatory vise.

The City Council Thursday also will debate a proposed city ordinance that would give residents more power to initiate code complaints. The proposal would apply to public nuisances such as a noisy neighbor. City officials said they might include water-wasters in the ordinance, then said they would consider that category later.

Bottom line: City officials worry they can't beat Vagim in November if voters think they've got no stake other than their wallets. But city officials wonder if a year of drought-caused regulatory pressure will refocus minds.

New Fresno city water rules

Beginning Friday in the city of Fresno:

Landscape watering: Limited to two days a week rather than the current three. Odd numbered addresses (street numbers ending in 1, 3, 5, 7 or 9) may water on Tuesdays and/or Saturdays. Even numbered addresses (street numbers ending in 0, 2, 4, 6 or 8) may water on Wednesdays and/or Sundays. No watering on Mondays, Thursdays or Fridays. Watering must occur only between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Car washing: Washing the family car in the driveway is permitted, but the laborer must use a bucket and a hose equipped with a shut-off nozzle for quick rinsing.

Winter rules: No watering at all Dec. 1 to March 1, instead of one day a week under the old rules.

If you go

What: Fresno City Council meeting

Where: Fresno City Council Chamber, 2600 Fresno St.

When: general meeting begins at 8:30 a.m. Thursday; item on code enforcement timed for 10:45 a.m., and items on water rates (including a closed session) timed for 3 p.m.

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