

Fresno's first water forum draws crowd in search of consensus

By George
Hostetter

Fresno City Hall's first in a series of water forums wasted no time coming to a consensus -- we need water.

After that, it was a free-for-all.

About 175 people gathered at Hoover High School in northeast Fresno on Monday night to discuss Fresno's short- and long-term water needs. Three other forums are on tap, every two weeks until early November.

They are a prelude to a City Council meeting, perhaps early next year, where water projects and the rate hikes to pay for them will again face Fresnoans.

Monday's event defied easy summation.

"We need to solve this problem, no doubt about it," said former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim, whose criticism of city water policy led to the forums. "The other forums will be interesting, too."

Fresno Communications Director Mark Standriff said the administration of Mayor Ashley Swearengin wants a wise and affordable water policy.

"We're looking forward to working with all essential parties," Standriff said.

The backstory to Monday's forum is both lengthy and, by now, tedious. The City Council last summer passed a series of annual water-rate hikes to pay for a \$410 million improvement to the city's water system. A surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno and lots of new pipes were at the heart of the project.

Vagim and a small but hearty band of followers got enough voter signatures to put the new rates to a vote of the people. Their concerns were many, but centered on cost. The council repealed the rate hikes in a legal settlement with Vagim that mandates these forums.

The mystery for weeks wasn't so much the forums' content. As Monday's event proved, there's simply no way for anyone in the central San Joaquin Valley with the slightest interest in the region's well-being to say anything new about water. The issues on the table date back to the 19th century.

The big question was the forums' structure. City Hall found a way to make the people's voice, not Vagim's, the center of attention.

Things began at 6 p.m. with what city officials called an open house. In essence, it was a low-key opportunity for people to munch on cookies (provided by City Hall) and review color graphics on Fresno's water needs. Experts stood by at each graphic to answer questions. Everything was one-on-one and casual.

The people were seated by 7 p.m. in chairs placed in a square, about 40 to a side. There was an open space in the middle. Some people called it "theater in the round." Lewis Michaelson, president of a public affairs firm in San Diego and a veteran facilitator of such forums, served as moderator.

The next 90 minutes featured a city water official explaining Fresno's water supply challenges, snippets of insight from public- and private-sector water experts and about an hour of question-and-answer involving the audience.

The basic premise facing the audience was this: Fresno has relied too long on ground water. Droughts don't last

forever, but neither do they stay away forever. Fresno has at its disposal in most years an immense portion of the Sierra Nevada's precious snowmelt. Spending money today to make better use of that liquid treasure will resonate throughout Fresno's future.

What ensued when the public got the microphone was outside Michaelson's control.

Someone said desalinization is the answer. Someone said a pipe should bring water from Millerton Lake to Fresno. Someone said more recharge basins are needed. Someone said urban sprawl must stop. Someone said farmers use too much water. Someone said suburban homeowners use too much water. To say the give-and-take was rapid would be an understatement.

Sometimes the experts in the front rows had responses. Sometimes Michaelson, after a tactful piece of silence, could only move on to the next raised hand.

But through it all, the evening's focus was on the citizen. The City Hall official and the political operative, the stars of the past year's water drama, had bit parts at best.

That was the city's plan all along.

IF YOU GO

Forum on Fresno's water future

Date: Monday, Oct. 13

When: 6 to 8:30 p.m.

Where: Oraze Elementary School, 3468 N. Armstrong Ave.

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