

## Second Fresno water forum follows a familiar script

By George  
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Andy Emparan speaks at the Recharge Fresno water forum at Oraze Elementary School on Oct. 13, 2004.  
MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Fresno City Hall's second water forum met a fate all but inevitable — it felt recycled.

About 160 people showed up Monday evening at Oraze Elementary School in east-central Fresno to discuss the city's water future.

A few more than that had gone to Hoover High School two weeks earlier to discuss the city's water needs.

Turns out just about everyone agrees Fresno's water future and needs are identical: We need the stuff, we want the stuff, we know how to get the stuff if Mother Nature will only cooperate.

"I'm really pleased with the high level of discourse in there," city Communications Director Mark Standriff said as the forum neared its end.

But maybe Forum No. 2's lack of zing was all part of the plan.

The forums were born from a deal reached earlier this year between City Hall and former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim. Mayor Ashley Swearengin in mid-2013 had wanted to embark on a \$410 million upgrade to the city's water system. Fresno's future depends on a safe, reliable supply of water, she said.

Vagim didn't dispute the sentiment, but did take issue with the project's scope and cost. After much noise, the city put

the idea on hold until after a series of four forums designed to let Fresnoans give their opinions on all things water.

It's pretty well established by now that clean water is a good thing, and Fresno can get its hands on a lot of it in a normal rain year. Two such forums in two weeks are the set-up for a third forum (Oct. 27) that will tackle the one issue always front and center — who's going to pay for all the required infrastructure?

Monday's debate followed the Hoover High model. Audience members sat in folding chairs. A facilitator worked a cordless microphone. Nearly a dozen water experts provided data and insight. Citizens asked questions, sometimes on topic, sometimes picking a political bone with City Hall.

Many of the audience members raising their hands at Orazo had done the same thing at Hoover.

At the heart of the matter is Fresno's declining aquifer, the guarantee that Sacramento will increasingly regulate water consumption and the spectacular blessing bestowed on Fresno in a normal rain year of 180,000 acre-feet of river water. Figuring out how to fix the first, minimize the second and make full use of the third has turned into political drama.

Monday's forum underscored a fundamental difference between some critics and City Hall water officials.

The critics think the city is pursuing the water project in large part at the behest of developers obsessed with growth. The critics think a southeast Fresno surface water treatment plant, part of the mayor's original proposal, is the essence of this quest.

City officials have said they merely want a Fresno that can meet its full potential by having a safe, reliable source of water even during droughts. The critics don't dispute the wisdom of this.

But, experts said on Monday, such a Fresno would be head-and-shoulders ahead of its urban competitors in the central San Joaquin Valley. They didn't have to add that such a Fresno would be mighty attractive to growth.

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