

EDITORIAL: City of Fresno's water plan is sound and worthy of approval

By The Bee Editorial Board



Fresno's water table has fallen more than 100 feet since the 1930s.

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People opposed to the city of Fresno's \$410 million plan to reduce the relentless overdrafting of our aquifer offered their objections during four recent community forums. Here is a sampling:

- The problem is not that bad, some said. We have plenty of water, and folks are doing a good job of conserving.
- The plan's signature piece, a \$227 million water treatment plant to be built in southeast Fresno, would be little more than a ratepayer-subsidized gift to developers looking to build subdivisions there.
- The city could expand a wastewater treatment plant in northwest Fresno instead and save ratepayers a whole lot of money.
- Even if the overdraft problem is real, the city ought to pay cash for the project or use Community Development Block Grants or tap water conservation grant programs.

A first-year high school debater would recognize what's going on. When you are opposed to something, throw everything you can against the wall and see what sticks.

In this case, however, little or nothing has stuck.

Fresno residents are overdrafting the aquifer by about 40,000 acre-feet per year. Our water table has fallen more than 100 feet since the 1930s.

A southeast location for a new water treatment plant is smart because it would efficiently tap into the Kings River, from which the city has the rights to 120,000 acre-feet in a normal year of rain. As the city also has the rights to 60,000 acre-feet annually from the San Joaquin River, it is well positioned to treat that water, use it and rely less on groundwater pumping.

According to city officials, expanding the northwest plant won't save a dime over building a new one in the southeast. And we concur with city leaders that the best way to avoid water-bill sticker shock is by using state-backed, low-interest loans and bonds repaid over time by ratepayers.

Doug Vagim and other opponents don't want to be confused by the facts. They have branded themselves as populists dedicated to sticking up for the little guy. It's an easy position to take. As The Bee's City Hall reporter, George Hostetter, wrote, "A month of water debate has delivered an unsurprising message to Fresno City Hall — given their druthers, people prefer stuff to be free."

In our arid Valley, the cost of delivering clean, safe drinking water will continue to rise. The plan proposed by City Hall, in fact, is the best option for controlling those increases and positioning Fresno residents to enjoy more prosperity. Moreover, it's a plan that likely would be approved by the state, which finally is serious about groundwater regulation.

Compared to what people in other Valley cities pay for their water, Fresno's rates are a bargain; the rate hikes needed to pay for the new infrastructure won't change this fact.

We encourage the Fresno City Council to put a sharp pencil to Mayor Ashley Swearengin's \$410 million proposal and save money where it can, but keep the integrity and strategy of this plan in place.

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