

# Fresno City Council agrees to begin customer voting on water rates

By George  
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City Hall once again is inviting Fresnans to consider paying more to secure a reliable water supply for the rest of the century.

It's a sign of the times that choosing to be misers probably won't mean a thing in the long run.

The City Council on Thursday voted 7-0 to begin a process that allows customers to vote on a proposed \$429 million upgrade to the city's water system.

Paying for the upgrade would require graduated annual increases to residential and commercial rates. The plan would raise the monthly bill for a typical single-family residence from the current \$24.49 to \$52.18 in five years.

Council members said Fresno faces a water crisis that required tough decisions many years ago.

"We're not going to kick this can down the road," Council Member Paul Caprioglio said.

Added Council President Steve Brandau: "We're at crunch time."

The council's vote did two things.

The first was to start a legally-mandated process whenever such hikes are proposed. The city's 135,000 water customers get to vote on the wisdom of higher rates.

City officials will mail ballots to each customer. A customer who does not return the ballot is assumed to have voted yes. A customer voting no must mark the ballot and return it to City Hall.

If a majority votes no, the project dies. If a majority doesn't vote no, the council will decide in February whether to approve the proposed increases.

The second thing the council did on Thursday was take another step in a complex debate on a resource that all agree is fundamental to Fresno's existence.

Events began rather quietly last year when Mayor Ashley Swearingin proposed a major upgrade to the water system.

Many factors were involved in her thinking. Pipes were getting old. New pipes were needed to the Kings and San Joaquin rivers. More recharge basins were on the drawing board.

The big piece was a big surface water treatment plant to be built in southeast Fresno.

The council jumped through all the legal hoops. Fresnans seemed to be on board with the project. Council members in the summer approved the higher rates.

But former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim all along warned council members: They were moving too fast with a project that's too expensive.

One thing led to another, and by this past summer the project was on hold, the higher rates had been repealed and a

series of public forums were scheduled so every Fresnan could speak on groundwater levels or construction bonds.

The forums made it crystal clear that Fresno was pumping way too much water from its aquifer. But there was a silver lining to this woe.

The city in a typical rain year gets 180,000 acre-feet from the two nearby rivers. The city uses only 130,000 to 140,000 acre-feet a year. But the river water needs treatment before going to homes. The city's system couldn't treat anywhere near all 180,000 acre-feet. That's why the city was sticking such a big straw in the aquifer.

Solution: Get the infrastructure in place to take full advantage of the river water, thus letting the aquifer recover in due time.

Challenge: Such infrastructure takes lots of money, and no one likes spending their own money on pipes and treatment plants.

The council, with several reservations such as concerns for low-income Fresnans, on Thursday said it's time to spend the money.

The odd thing is that Fresnans almost certainly aren't in a position to say no.

City officials said Sacramento is jumping into the water-regulating business with both feet. Fresno can make its own water plan and pay for it voluntarily, city officials said. Or, the officials added, Fresno can involuntarily pay for Sacramento's plan.

In other action, the council:

- Approved a change in regulations that permits outdoor watering one day a week from Dec. 1 through Feb. 28. The previous regulation, that went into effect earlier this year, would have allowed no outdoor watering during the three months.
- Approved a deal that will allow Apec International to proceed with plans to turn downtown's empty Hotel Fresno into an apartment complex with about 80 units. The vote was unanimous. Previous plans from other developers to do something with the historic building almost always met with skepticism from at least a few council members.

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