

Protest election on Fresno water rates gets a lively start

By George
Hostetter



This is the end product at the city of Fresno's water treatment plant on Chestnut near Behymer in northeast Fresno, pure treated water. Photographed on Sept. 18, 2013. MARK CROSSE/THE FRESNO BEE

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The Fresno City Clerk's Office by the end of last week had received 11 votes protesting possible hikes to water rates.

A deluge is coming, though.

City officials said they've been told about 5,500 protest votes are at the Post Office, soon to be delivered to City Hall.

This doesn't mean higher rates are doomed. It does suggest Fresno is headed toward a nail-biter of an election.

"It's going to be exciting," Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda said.

No kidding, since both sides in this fight say nothing less than Fresno's future is at stake.

The short version of events began Nov. 20 when the City Council voted to start the legal process necessary to raise water rates. Mayor Ashley Swearingin wants a series of annual hikes to pay for an upgrade to the water system.

This process gives ratepayers a chance to say yes or no to the increases — a protest election.

City officials this month mailed more than 213,000 ballots to customers. It will not be unusual for a single account to get more than one ballot. Owner and renter at an address may be different people.

By law, a person protesting the hikes must return the ballot to City Hall. An unreturned ballot is deemed to be a yes. City officials said each account (about 133,000) gets only one vote. The “no” ballot is counted if there’s a conflict between two voters on a single account.

The protest vote ends at 5 p.m. Feb. 5. Protest ballots must be at the City Clerk’s Office by that time to count.

The City Council is slated to conduct a protest hearing on water rates on the evening of Feb. 5. It will be a short one if more than half of the accounts vote no — the proposed hikes are dead on arrival. If the protest fails, the council can vote to approve Swearingin’s plan.

The long version of events is not for the faint of heart.

It’s sufficient to note that Swearingin sees the \$429 million upgrade as securing a safe water supply for Fresno through the 21st century. The monthly bill for a typical single-family residence would essentially double in five years. Even at that, Swearingin said, Fresnoans are getting a bargain compared to most of California.

Critics for more than a year have said the project is too big. They question the need for a new surface water treatment plant proposed for southeast Fresno. They say there are less expensive ways to get water and keep it.

Protest votes on proposed rate hikes are nothing new at City Hall. But the place has never seen the politics of this one.

An estimated 5,500 protest ballots are about to drop on City Hall in one fell swoop. A hint of things to come? City officials said they have no relevant history to justify a guess.

Contact George Hostetter: ghostetter@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6272 or [@GeorgeHostetter](https://twitter.com/GeorgeHostetter) on Twitter.

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