

Thoughts on City Hall issues



THE CITY BEAT

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Posted by George Hostetter on December 29, 2014

Two dozen quick thoughts on Fresno City Hall:

- 1.) The City Clerk's Office as of Monday afternoon had received about 16,800 ballots protesting higher water rates. The ballots come from the Post Office in baskets, about 800 to a basket. The Clerk's Office got eight baskets late Friday afternoon, another 13 on Monday. City Clerk Yvonne and her staff on Monday were busy processing the ballots.
- 2.) The city mailed about 213,000 ballots. There are about 133,000 residential and commercial accounts. That means about 80,000 accounts received duplicate ballots -- one to the property-owner, one to the renter. Only one vote per account is counted. That means some of the 16,800 ballots in the City Clerk's Office probably are duplicates.
- 3.) Still, 16,800 protest ballots during what essentially was Christmas Week is a big number.
- 4.) The protest vote ends at 5 p.m. Feb. 5. If more than half of the accounts result in protest votes, the possibility of higher water rates (at this time) dies. For the sake of argument, let's say that figure is 67,000. It may not be a stretch to say that opponents to higher water rates as of Monday are at least 20% of the way there. (Keep in mind that a protest ballot must be returned to City Hall to count as a "no" to higher rates. Unreturned ballots are viewed as "yes" votes.)
- 5.) I called District 6 Council Member Lee Brand on Monday afternoon. We chatted about the significance of 16,800 protest ballots landing at City Hall pretty much all at once. Brand supports Mayor Ashley Swearengin's proposed \$429 million upgrade to the city's water system, the project at the heart of possible rate increases. He says Fresno's future depends on water. He says the Mayor's project is pivotal to securing a reliable supply of water. Brand on Monday afternoon was worried.
- 6.) I played devil's advocate with Brand. I said opponents of rate increases don't need 67,000 protest ballots to win. They need only 40,000. Maybe fewer -- perhaps 30,000 or even 25,000 could be enough to kill any thought of rate hikes.
- 7.) As readers may recall, Fresno went through a protest election on this specific issue last year. City Hall received only about 500 protest ballots. Then former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim got involved. One thing led to another, and pretty soon City Hall was doing another protest election (the current one). The method for informing Fresnoans of the election was much different the second time. For a variety of reasons, it was much easier to protest the possible hikes.
- 8.) The protest election goes for 45 days. Permit me to repeat myself -- the first one in 2013 resulted in about 500 protest votes over the course of a month-and-a-half. Here we are, only a week or so into the second 45-day election, and City Hall has received about 16,800 protest ballots. In rough terms, we're talking 500 vs. 16,800. That's quite a contrast.
- 9.) Now, even if the current election fails to get 67,000 protest votes, any proposal to boost water rates must be approved by the City Council. That would take at least four votes. The council has already jumped through this hoop

once, back in August 2013 when it approved hikes that would have doubled the monthly bill for the typical homeowner within four years. Council Members Clint Olivier and Sal Quintero voted no. They are still on the council. (That first set of hikes was later repealed by the council.)

10.) Let's say the current election does not result in a majority of protest ballots. Let's say 35,000 protest ballots are returned by Feb. 5. Let's say the Mayor on Feb. 5 sends the proposed higher rates (doubling the typical homeowner's rate within five years) to the council. How might the council react knowing that 35,000 adults in Fresno had already taken the time to formally oppose the hikes?

11.) I'm guessing any Council Member with thoughts of winning another election with Fresno as a base of operations would take a long, hard look at that 35,000 number.

12.) Would Olivier still vote no on rate hikes? That would be my guess.

13.) Would Quintero still vote no? A possibility.

14.) Would Esmeralda Soria, who takes over in District 1 in January, vote no? A possibility.

15.) Would District 2's Steve Brandau vote no? A possibility.

16.) Would Brand change his mind and vote no? He wants to win the 2016 mayoral race. He might see the handwriting on the wall and vote no, thinking 2017 or 2018 would be a better time to pitch the hikes.

17.) What about District 3's Oliver Baines and District 4's Paul Caprioglio? They might look at that 35,000 number and decide there just isn't the necessary public mandate to go forward with higher water rates.

18.) The protest election isn't the end of democracy on this issue. The big reason Fresno is doing another protest election is that Vagim last year got enough signatures (about 5,000) of registered voters to put higher rates on the November general election ballot. City Hall didn't want that to happen, so the city officials reached a truce that led to this second protest election. Let's say the council on Feb. 5 raises rates despite 35,000 or 40,000 protest ballots. I'm guessing someone could begin another petition drive. I'm guessing that person could get the signatures of 5,000 registered voters to put the higher rates on the ballot of a special election. That election would require voters who support the higher rates to go to the polls or take the trouble to complete an absentee ballot.

19.) Things don't end there. The City Council on Dec. 18 approved the 2035 general plan update. This is a plan with huge ambitions. This plan aims to transform Fresno's older neighborhoods. It aims to eliminate the high concentrations of poverty that make Fresno a topic of national debate. It aims bring quality housing, more recreation, greater wealth, increased security and rising happiness to immense numbers of Fresnoans. It aims to curtail sprawl, and maybe even end it. It aims to invest billions in older neighborhoods' deteriorating infrastructure. City officials have made no secret that the Mayor's \$429 million upgrade to the water system is pivotal to the new general plan's success.

20.) The 2035 general plan update was supported by many, many Fresnoans.

21.) How does Fresno say no to higher water rates and yes to the 2035 general plan with all its idealism?

22.) Not everyone was 100% behind the 2035 general plan. Brandau on Dec. 18 was a passionate critic. He said plan's Utopian vision will lead to a government that panics when reality hits. He said that government will resort to authority to make its dreams come true. He said the things that made America great, its initiative and its courage and its capacity for hard work, will wither on the shoals of top-down egalitarianism. Brandau on Dec. 18 also said he knew he was outnumbered on the dais. He said he saw no way to stop the steamroller that is the 2035 general plan.

23.) Then the 213,000 water-rate protest ballots were mailed.

24.) I'm guessing there is a winner in all this: Granville Homes President Darius Assemi. I wouldn't be surprised if he's in his north Fresno office, dancing with fists high in the air like he's Rocky Balboa atop the 72 steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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