

Protest ballot count nears 30,000



POLITICAL NOTEBOOK

Posted by George Hostetter on January 9, 2015

Fresno City Hall officials said 29,323 non-duplicate water-rate protest ballots had been received as of Friday.

The rate of return has slowed considerably. City Hall received about 17,000 ballots over several days in December.

City officials it's too early to say if each of the 29,323 ballots has been properly completed.

About 213,000 ballots were mailed. Some properties received more than one ballot -- property-owner and tenants each getting one.

Only one ballot per property counts. That means a total of about 133,000 ballots is possible.

Only protests are returned. Unreturned ballots are treated as support for the rates.

The City Council is scheduled to hold a water-rate hearing on Feb. 5. Mayor Ashley Swearengin's proposed upgrade to the city's water system goes back to the drawing board if a majority of protest ballots is returned to City Hall by Feb. 5.

Legally-mandated protest votes on proposed rate increases are nothing new to California cities. This one is different. A legal settlement with former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim required City Hall, among other things, to include a postage-paid envelope with each ballot. This is not standard.

City communications director Mark Standriff said the city has gone "above and beyond" what the law calls for. He said Fresnans "are engaged" in the process.

Swearengin is proposing five years of annual increases to residential and commercial water rates to pay for a \$429 million upgrade. The biggest part of the project is a new surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno.

Swearengin has said the upgrade is vital on two counts. First, it's the best way to assure a safe and reliable supply of water far into the future. Second, it's the best way to meet increasingly strict federal and state water regulations.

City officials say the monthly bill for the typical single-family residence would double in five years. They add that Fresno's rates even then would be modest compared to many California cities.

Opponents say they support system improvements, but warn that the mayor's plan is too much too soon.

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