

## Brandau's news conference probably is about noses as well as water



# THE CITY BEAT

GEORGE  
HOSTETTER

Posted by George Hostetter on January 14, 2015

Fresno City Hall should be hopping on Thursday -- water rates will be the catalyst.

Council Member Steve Brandau has scheduled a news conference at 10:30 a.m. Thursday at the historic Fresno Water Tower at O and Fresno streets.

His agenda: The proposed hikes to water rates to pay for Mayor Ashley Swearingin's \$429 million upgrade to the city's water system. She said Fresno's future depends on the project.

I called Brandau on Wednesday afternoon to get a hint what he'll say. He declined to reveal anything beyond what is in his announcement.

But let's look at some facts already on the table:

\* Brandau on Aug. 15, 2013 was part of a five-member council majority that approved steep hikes to residential and commercial rates. The hikes were spread over four years. The hikes were to pay for what at the time was a \$410 million project.

\* Brandau had mixed feelings before casting his yes vote. He said he would have preferred a two-week delay so ratepayers could ask more questions.

\* Council Members Clint Olivier and Sal Quintero voted no. They said their constituents can't handle the higher bills.

\* Olivier and Quintero were re-elected to second terms in June 2014.

\* The council on July 31, 2014 repealed the rate hikes. The vote was 6-0, with Council Member Paul Caprioglio absent.

\* The repeal was part of a legal settlement with former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim and his allies. Without the settlement, the rate hikes would have gone to a voter referendum on Nov. 4. City officials didn't like that idea.

\* The council on Nov. 20 voted 7-0 to begin the legal process necessary to approve a new set of rate hikes, this time for a \$429 million project. The council's decision was not an approval of the hikes. The decision merely gave rate-payers and property-owners the option to cast a "protest" ballot objecting to the rate hikes.

\* This Proposition 218 protest vote began on Dec. 19. The city mailed approximately 213,000 ballots for an election of an unusual type. The bottom line is this: If enough people send in their protest ballots, the rate hikes die. Different people tell me different numbers as to the number of protest ballots needed to kill the hikes. But it's almost certainly more than 50,000, and could be more than 60,000.

\* The protest vote ends Feb. 5. The City Clerk's Office as of last week had received nearly 30,000 ballots that potentially could count toward killing the hikes.

\* If voters upset with the hikes fall short of the necessary number of protest ballots, then the mayor's proposed rate hikes for the \$429 million project go to the City Council. As in August 2013, the council would have to pass the hikes for them to go into effect.

\* Blong Xiong was the District 1 council member on Aug. 15, 2013. He supported the rate hikes. Xiong was termed out on Jan. 8, 2015.

\* Esmeralda Soria is the new District 1 council member. She took a cautious approach to the rate hikes while on the campaign trail (at least in our interviews). She said water and water infrastructure are vital to Fresno's future. She also said the proposed hikes would be a burden to many District 1 residents.

\* The council on Dec. 18, 2014 approved the mayor's 2035 general plan by a 5-2 vote. Brandau and Olivier voted no. Brandau was especially critical of the plan, saying (among other things) that it failed to encourage entrepreneurial effort.

\* Swearingin has said repeatedly that a key to implementing the 2035 general plan is her \$429 million upgrade to the city's water system.

\* Everyone at City Hall counts noses. They will do so again if the water rate hikes go to the council on Feb. 5.

\* Brandau - Soria - Quintero - Olivier (four of seven council members): Is that the fundamental message of Brandau's news conference on Thursday?

Brandau in our phone chat on Wednesday did give me one detail of his plans tomorrow. He said he'll use the "council member comments" portion of Thursday's City Council meeting to elaborate on his thoughts on rate hikes.

#### Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>