

Mayor promotes water plan before key council vote

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Councilman Steve Brandau speaks at Thursday's press conference while the mayor and Council member Paul Caprioglio look on. At a Thursday morning press conference in the shadow of the old Fresno Water Tower, Mayor Ashley Swearingin thanked state officials for agreeing to give the city a low-interest \$195 million loan that will help fund a \$429 million upgrade to the city's aging water system.

"This is a major step for our water infrastructure plan in Fresno," the mayor said.

Until this week, the state had only committed to loaning the city \$50 million for the project.

At the downtown press conference, Swearingin said the additional state funding would save the city more than \$104 million in interest payments over the life of the 30-year loan.

In proposing what would be the largest -- and most expensive -- public works project in the city's history, the mayor acknowledged residents' water bills are going to be rising.

According to the most recent projections, a typical single-family residence today paying about \$25 a month will see their water bill increase to \$39 in five years under the mayor's plan.

"Rate payers will have more control over what their bill is going to be because it will be based, in part, on their monthly consumption," Swearingin said.

City council members Steve Brandau and Paul Caprioglio flanked the mayor at the event and both said they would

support her water plan when the council votes Feb. 26.

“The fog is lifting on the financing part of the plan,” Brandau said. “But we still have to make sure our rate payers get the best possible deal.”

Echoing his fellow council member, Caprioglio said, “It’s our responsibility to keep rates at the lowest possible level for the citizens of Fresno.”

City officials have worked hard to generate support for the project, recently proposing a \$1 million-a-year subsidy that would cut about \$5 from the monthly water bill of nearly 20,000 qualifying low-income residents.

“It’s never easy to look your constituents in the eye and tell them that their water rates are going to go up,” Swearingin said to Brandau and Caprioglio while thanking them for their support.

The mayor’s plan includes construction of a new surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno as well as major upgrades to the city’s outdated pipes and water-related infrastructure.

Noting that “last year alone, the area’s water table dropped four feet,” Swearingin said, “We’ve got to begin rebuilding our water savings account for our kids and grandkids.”

“We’ve tried to be extremely cost-conscious,” she added. “But we’re at a point today where delay is no longer an option.”

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