

Fresno water-rate battle heads to a key vote

By George Hostetter



In September 2013, plant operator Brad Hoagland inspects equipment in the filter gallery at the city of Fresno's water treatment plant in northeast Fresno. MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE

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What: Hearing on proposed Fresno city water rates



Where: Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.

When: 5:30 p.m. Thursday

The Fresno City Council is slated Thursday to vote on higher water rates.



Sounds simple. Events, however, almost certainly will unfold in memorable fashion.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin will ask the council to approve five years of rate hikes needed to begin paying for a \$429 million upgrade of the city's water system.

The project in various forms has been on City Hall's front burner for nearly two years.

Yes, the mayor says, the typical single-family residence's monthly water bill could double by 2020. But, she adds, the assurance of a safe and reliable water supply far into the future makes the project a no-brainer.

Critics say there are better and cheaper means to achieve the same end.

These competing themes have pounded at Fresno's collective mind since spring 2013. Both sides remain pugnacious over the smallest details. But nuance by now is just about a spent force.

Here are six questions that provide an inside look at key factors in Thursday's drama:

- Will Doug Vagim get more than three minutes at the public microphone?

Council president Oliver Baines is a nondiscriminating drill sergeant when it comes to audience participation. Each speaker gets three minutes, he says, but no more. His point: A hearing without limits becomes chaos.

But Vagim on this issue isn't your average guy.

The former Fresno County supervisor in 2013 stood alone in the council chamber and warned members they were making a mistake by approving Swarengin's first version of the water project. Vagim vowed to get the people more involved. He did it.

Vagim says he will deliver a succinct message in his three minutes.

"I don't like all this debt that's going to be put around the necks of the people of Fresno," he says.

But, Vagim adds, he hopes a council member after the public-comment period invites him back to the microphone for an extended version.

- Will Swarengin roll to a 7-0 council vote?

Swarengin held a news conference Thursday to announce that Fresno is now qualified for nearly \$200 million in low-interest state loans for the project. This will knock more than \$100 million off the project's cost over 30 years. Ratepayers will see a \$3 per month savings in five years.

It was Swarengin's company at the historic Water Tower that caught the attention of City Hall nose-counters.

Council Members Steve Brandau and Paul Caprioglio followed Swarengin to the microphone. They didn't go so far as to guarantee a yes vote on Thursday. But both praised the state's generosity and the water project's wisdom.

Brandau and Caprioglio — yes. Baines and Council Member Lee Brand have already expressed their support — yes and yes.

That's four — victory for the mayor.

But Swarengin wants unanimous support on something this controversial. That focuses attention on Council Members Esmeralda Soria, Sal Quintero and Clint Olivier. They have been a cautious trio so far in public.

- Will Assembly Member Henry T. Perea show up?

Thursday's hearing is a golden opportunity for the Fresno Democrat (and former council member) to take a much-deserved star turn.

The nearly \$200 million in state loans is a strong hint that the administration of Gov. Jerry Brown as well as the Sacramento bureaucracy like Swarengin's project. Perea didn't become a three-term assembly member by publicly

bucking a powerful Democratic chief executive.

Perea, in fact, was a key player in getting the state to go far beyond the original \$50 million loan.

“As a result of discussions I helped arrange between state agencies and the city of Fresno, I am pleased the State Water Resources Control Board increased State Revolving Funds to move the city’s water plan in a step in the right direction to lower water rate increases for residents,” Perea said Thursday in a written statement. “It’s important while we upgrade our aging water infrastructure we do everything we can to keep water bills affordable for those struggling to put food on the table.”

Finally, Soria is a former Perea policy adviser and owes to a considerable degree her November victory in the District 1 race to the support of Perea and his father, Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea. This will be her first big vote. Her ex-boss might want to be in the audience.

- Is Fresno headed toward another water petition?

That’s a good bet.

Vagim and a small group of allies last year got enough signatures of registered voters to put the original water-rate hikes to a vote of the people. Things never got that far. Vagim and city officials signed a deal that led to a repeal of the rates and new rules on public outreach for the next rate-plan.

Vagim and his top lieutenants agreed not to personally launch another petition drive against the next council-approved rate plan. But that doesn’t stop someone else from spearheading such an effort in grassroots democracy.

The bar for a new petition drive isn’t high. Vagim says it’s fewer than 4,000 registered voters. He notes that the city in the recent Proposition 218 protest vote received more than 41,000 valid protest ballots.

Vagim says he knows of people ready to begin gathering signatures should the council approve the proposed rate hikes. He declined to give names.

“I’m not encouraging this,” Vagim says. “But I won’t try to stop it, either.”

- Is Vagim running for mayor?

Vagim doesn’t fluster easily. He’s never flinched in periodic verbal donnybrooks with Brand over water. But talk of his political dreams knocks him off stride.

“I don’t want to politicize” the water-rate battle, Vagim says.

At the same time, he says he has politics in his DNA.

“I’m not running for mayor,” Vagim says. “That’s doesn’t mean I won’t run for mayor.”

Swearingin is termed out in January 2017.

- What is Swearingin’s game plan?

Thursday’s hearing will be full of facts and figures presented by staff.

There will be talk about a new surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno. The challenges of expanding the existing treatment plant in northeast Fresno will come up. Debate is inevitable on whether residential water rates in five years will double, triple or merely rise by a manageable fraction.

Swearingin knows the vote late Thursday night (or early Friday morning) isn’t the end.

“We’re going to focus on continuing our public outreach over the next 30 days,” Swearengin says. “That’s why I’m inviting anyone who has questions or concerns about our water plan to sit down with me and my staff, face-to-face, and talk about it. We’ve found that once a customer has all the facts, they support the plan.”

To make an appointment to talk with the mayor or her staff, call (559) 621-8000.

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