

EDITORIAL: Fresno's water recharge plan deserves support



The water of Millerton Lake sits far beneath the old Fresno County Courthouse, February 19, 2014.

JOHN WALKER — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [Buy Photo](#)

Fresno residents have enjoyed bargain water rates for decades. But the reality of the San Joaquin Valley's dry climate, an increasing reliance on groundwater pumping and the need to preserve water for future generations dictate that the city invest in its water system.

Paying for these infrastructure improvements would require rate hikes. Bluntly put, ratepayers don't like their bills to go up and leaders are hesitant to approve rate hikes because of the potentially negative impacts on their political careers.

But the \$429 million upgrade plan that the Fresno City Council will vote on Thursday is solid and deserves support. And, in fact, even with the hikes, the city would continue to have some of the state's lowest water rates.

The plan has been debated for about two years. It has been fully vetted and it will serve the city's residential and business needs well into the future. Moreover, a majority of Fresno households have signaled their approval by not returning protest ballots for water bill increases that largely would pay for construction of a surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno.

It is important the residents know why the treatment plant is crucial to Fresno's future. The city has two water contracts totaling 180,000 acre feet, but doesn't have the capability of converting all of this water from the Kings and San Joaquin rivers into drinking water. The southeast plant and its pipelines would enable the city to fully utilize the river water and thus replenish Fresno's dwindling aquifer.

Since the plan was first introduced, it has been improved significantly in terms of affordability.

Assembly Member Henry T. Perea of Fresno helped convince state officials to increase the size of a state loan from \$50 million to \$195 million. In addition, the interest on the loan has been shaved from 2% to 1.66%. These changes would decrease the originally proposed rate hikes and provide ratepayers with \$104.5 million in interest savings over 30 years. Mayor Ashley Swearengin also has proposed a \$1 million program to help low-income residents in single-family residences save about \$5 monthly on their water bills.

The effort that has gone into this package is impressive. The plan has the support of state water officials, which is important in light of coming groundwater regulation, and it has been peer reviewed.

Opposition to the project has centered on three themes: It is too costly, too ambitious and merely a ploy to subsidize residential sprawl. Critics say that expanding the existing northeast surface water treatment would take care of the city's needs.

These contentions don't hold up under scrutiny.

The price often cited by critics for expanding the northeast plant is \$100 million. That actual cost, according to city officials, is nearly double that and the plant's expanded capacity would not address Fresno's groundwater depletion and water quality issues. And while opponents gain attention with talk about water bills doubling or even tripling, the truth is that the hikes would be phased in over five years and that people who thoughtfully conserve wouldn't be overly burdened. The criticism that the plan is a valentine to developers is laughable. Mayor Swearengin and a council super majority passed a 2035 General Plan Update in December that limits growth on the fringe and directs development to the city's urban core.

Safe, clean drinking water is essential. If passed, this proposal will solve a serious problem and capitalize on the city's river water contracts instead of leaving future leaders to clean up the mess.

Residents should be applauding Mayor Swearengin and the five Fresno City Council members who have stated or signaled their support — Lee Brand, Oliver Baines, Steve Brandau, Paul Caprioglio and Clint Olivier — for their intelligence and political courage.