

Esmeralda Soria: Why I oppose mayor's water plan

By Esmeralda
Soria

As a new member on the Fresno City Council, the easiest path for me to take would be to vote “yes” on Mayor Ashley Swearingin’s proposed water project. I realize there is a great need for critical water resources today and in the future. When I ran for the council, I vowed to listen to my constituents and fully examine all decisions before I cast my votes.

I have spent over 200 hours reviewing documents, meeting with city staff, touring our water facilities, and speaking to my constituents as I researched this important issue. I have decided not to support the mayor’s proposed plan at this time, and I’d like to explain why.

Over 41,000 Fresnans expressed their opposition to this project through the recent Proposition 218 protest vote, including 5,838 households in District 1. In addition, because of shortcomings in the public-outreach process, many residents were left out of the decision.

We also have an unfortunate history in our city of overpromising, underdelivering and underutilizing water-facility projects, including the T3 Plant (at Dakota and Armstrong avenues) and the Northeast Water Treatment Plant. Both of these projects sat partially idle for years, even though taxpayers bore the cost of a full-capacity plant up front. The T3 plant went online in 2013, yet only reached full operational capacity a few weeks ago, and the northeast plant is only running at 60% capacity. As elected officials, we need to be better stewards of our taxpayers’ trust and money.

Additionally, there are significant uncertainties with the proposed project that would impact implementation, performance and customer rates that have not to date been fully vetted.

- We are in the middle of re-negotiations on our city’s Water Conveyance Agreement, which determines how much water we are entitled to every year. These annual negotiations will not conclude until after our City Council vote. The last time the city had a multiyear Conveyance Agreement was 1976. There is no long-term agreement in place to rely on, yet the proposed plan assumes and factors that we will receive 100% of the determined annual needs immediately and rely on it throughout the term of the loan. How can we vote on a project without certainty on our future water entitlement?
- A full allocation of our water entitlement is not guaranteed. Our surface-water allocation has drastically fluctuated over the years due to many factors. Today, we are in the middle of a historic drought that has resulted in zero surface-water allocation from the Central Valley Water Project and only one-third of our water entitlement from Pine Flat; yet this proposed project assumes almost 100% of such surface water allocations.

We have not received 100% allocation in five full years. What does this mean to the plan or the effect on consumer rates if the entitlement delivery continues to fall short? Would a newly constructed Southeast Water Treatment Plant be underutilized as in past practices?

- What’s more, there are existing projects in the works that can help us meet current water demands. A recent Fresno Bee report indicated the waste water treatment plant already in development can help us meet up to one-third of Fresno’s total water demand. This existing project has not been taken into consideration under the mayor’s plan, and I believe it warrants public vetting.
- California’s Sustainable Ground Water Management Act — which will create new regulations requiring us to manage our underground water more effectively through regional planning — adds more uncertainty. Specifics of these regulations are yet to be developed, and this project does not take them into account.

- Federal and state dollars, like the 2014 Water Bond, cap-and-trade auction proceeds, and other sources may continue to help offset the cost of expanding our infrastructure. This project does not fully take these into account. It's unclear if we will be eligible to recapture expenditures such as pipeline replacement and well rehabilitation/replacement, which will not be outlined nor defined until much after the City Council's vote. A plan must be fully developed and laid out before requesting financial investment and approval.

We should take these and other factors into consideration before spending limited city resources and asking Fresnoans to trust us with this project.

I am committed to making smart decisions for our future. Nothing is more critical than a reliable clean-water supply. But after examining this issue carefully, I have concluded that this proposal has too many uncertainties and is too high priced to earn my support at this time.

Esmeralda Soria represents District 1, which covers portions of central and west Fresno, on the Fresno City Council.