

Fresno council votes 6-1 to approve \$429 million water project

By George
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In September 2013, plant operator Brad Hoagland inspects equipment in the filter gallery at the city of Fresno wastewater treatment plant.

MARK CROSSE — FRESNO BEE FILE PHOTO

The Fresno City Council approved Mayor Ashley Swearingin's historic water project Thursday night, assuring a secure supply of the liquid gold well into the 21st century.

The 6-1 vote was actually for a five-year rate plan. But its effect is to set in motion a \$429 million upgrade of a crumbling system that for too long has relied on a much-abused aquifer.

Council Member Sal Quintero cast the no vote, saying he worries about lingering questions on a key conveyance contract with the Fresno Irrigation District.

But Quintero's tepid opposition did nothing to dampen the high spirits of his council colleagues. The other six said it was time for city leaders to do the right thing for Fresno by building necessary water infrastructure. "Kicking the can down the road" was the nearly unanimous term for past City Hall indecisiveness.

"I don't believe I could live with myself if I was one of those who kicked the can down the road," Council Member Steve Brandau said.

Swearingin, who spent the evening sitting next to City Manager Bruce Rudd on the dais, said the vote will resonate through Fresno history.

"After years of uncertainty and debate, we have finally established a sustainable water program for our city and I commend our council members for their leadership and foresight," Swearingin said. "Our lives and our fortunes depend on access to a safe, reliable water supply. I am convinced we have taken a firm step forward to secure this precious resource, both now and for future generations."

The project's particulars have been kicked around for the better part of two years. There is a new surface water treatment plant slated for southeast Fresno. There are miles of new pipes. Miles of old pipes will be replaced.

None of this comes cheap. A five-year rate plan to begin paying for everything features a series of annual hikes. The typical single-family residence could see its monthly bill go from about \$25 now to about \$49 in mid-2019.

City officials in recent weeks came up with a \$1 million annual program to help low-income ratepayers. They got state lawmakers, including Assembly Member (and former council member) Henry T. Perea, to help persuade Sacramento to dramatically bolster its package of low-interest loans. They authorized a third-party oversight board to make sure this and other big-ticket construction projects don't turn into money holes.

But getting from all this preliminary work to the final vote took five hours on Thursday, and much of it unfolded in dramatic fashion.

Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda opened the hearing with a detailed review of the project. He wasted no time in reminding the council that the public's health and safety was issue No. 1.

Without water that is both clean and plentiful, Esqueda said, "People get sick. People die."

About 35 people from the audience spoke. Most were against the project. They said it was too burdensome on the poor. They said it paid insufficient homage to conservation. They said it needed more seasoning.

City officials had heard the same complaints in various forums since mid-2013.

Brandau made the motion to approve the five-year rate plan, in essence putting the entire plan in play. He proposed several amendments, including what he called a "poison pill" that prohibits the city from spending one penny more than the stated price of \$429 million and pocket change.

Council Member Esmeralda Soria got everyone's attention when she said she wanted some type of guarantee on the new surface water treatment plant. She was concerned that there might not be water to run through it once it's built. This fear was tied to a city-Fresno Irrigation District contract for moving Kings River water into the city.

Two things stood out.

First, Soria had written an opinion piece for The Bee stating all of her doubts about the project.

Second, she struggled on Thursday to find the right words to express what kind of tweak could get her to change her mind. Council President Oliver Baines called for a break and everyone went behind closed doors. The tension disappeared when Soria asked that any expansion of the new treatment plant be postponed until City Hall and FID solidify their contractual marriage.

Context for Thursday's hearing falls into three key areas.

The staff report explains why Swearingin's \$429 million project is, in the administration's view, the best and cheapest

way to secure a steady supply of water for decades to come.

Simply put, Fresno for too long has been overly dependent on groundwater. In 2014 (admittedly a year of unusually severe drought), the reports says, about five of every six gallons used by Fresnans came from the aquifer.

Those days are coming to a rapid end, in part because Sacramento regulators wielding a big stick demand so.

But, the report says, Fresno is blessed with a surefire solution: build a new surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno along with the supporting infrastructure. Fresno will then make full use of the billions of gallons of river water at its disposal in normal rain years.

That water now goes largely to local farmers.

The report explores environmental and financial effects of Swearingin's plan. The former's focus is on dozens of wells plagued by dangerous contamination. The latter's focus boils down to this: The typical single-family residence could see its bill nearly double by 2020.

The next piece of context is Fresno's favorite blood sport — politics.

Swearingin tackled the water-rate plan in earnest in the weeks after she suffered her most haunting political defeat, the rejection by voters of her effort to privatize residential trash service in the June 2013 Measure G special election.

In other words, she doubled down on controversial policy decisions, seemingly oblivious to crowd sentiment or wounded pride. She's clearly an ambitious woman. After all, she ran a spirited but ultimately losing campaign for the state controller's office last fall. Whether her fortitude on the water front in 2015 is viewed by future voters as leadership or folly remains to be seen.

At the same time, former Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim has turned his anger with the mayor's plan into a political fountain of youth. He, almost alone, vowed to make the project a high-profile public debate, one that drilled relentlessly on cost and the potential for government waste. He succeeded, and along the way generated talk (not to mention worry) at City Hall about a possible run for mayor in 2016.

The final bit of context is the wisdom of Yogi Berra: "It ain't over till it's over."

Anyone paying attention knew days ago that a council majority supported the mayor's plan. Council President Baines and Council Members Lee Brand, Clint Olivier, Paul Caprioglio and Brandau in one way or another had expressed their admiration for the mayor's vision — and, by implication, their bravery in voluntarily standing by her side.

Thursday's hearing in part is the result of Vagim's successful threat last year to put the higher rates to a vote of the people. He is barred by a legal settlement from leading a second petition drive to do the same thing.

Vagim says plenty of other people are ready to pick up his standard.

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