

Fresno City Council buys water, passes water-conservation law

By George Hostetter
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The Fresno City Council on Thursday bought some much-needed water and brought some unexpected peace to a dust-control program.

The council first gave staff approval to buy 2,990 acre-feet of water now stored at Millerton Lake. The price is \$1.1 million. The money is in hand. The purchase will not affect rates.

City officials had once feared the historic four-year drought would mean Fresno gets no water from the lake. The city has entitlements to about 60,000 acre-feet in normal rain years.

An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

Weeks of negotiations with the Friant Water Authority and the federal Bureau of Reclamation led to a something-is-better-than-nothing scenario.

Council President Oliver Baines wondered why Fresno finds itself buying Millerton Lake water when the city last year was selling supplies from the lake. Staff had no clear answer other than policy flip-flops are inherent in any long-term crisis.

Otherwise, the council showed no qualms about the purchase. Georgeanne White, Mayor Ashley Swearengin's chief of staff, cut to the issue's essence when she said there's a long line of thirsty customers desperate to snap up what Fresno disdains.

The council then passed an emergency water-conservation ordinance that takes effect immediately. Council Member Clint Olivier cast the lone no vote, saying the law is too full of guesswork.

The debate certainly highlighted the confusion caused by a water shortage with no end in sight and a long list of executive, legislative and administrative agencies intent on saving the day with their own rules.

Three items dominated the talk:

- Everyone agreed that new or resurfaced swimming pools could be filled in a continuous fashion until full. However, pools emptied at the insistence of health officials can be refilled only during the hours of 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. The latter restriction is designed reduce the demand on the city's system in the evening and early morning when landscape irrigation is permitted.
- The hydrant-meter program will remain unchanged, but only until that day several years down the road when the city's recycled-water system is more fully developed.

The program allows companies to use drinking water from fire hydrants for dust control at job sites. City officials wanted authority to suspend the program and send tanker trucks to the wastewater treatment plant west of town to get recycled water. This idea generated no excitement from the council dais.

- Outdoor misters, those devices that spray a fine mist of water to help cool Fresnans gathered at an outdoor event on hot summer days, became a star. Apparently, the city for more than 20 years has outlawed misters, popular at restaurants with outdoor dining and on backyard patios. It appeared that no one on the dais or among staff either knew of this prohibition or the extent of its reach. Jaws dropped. Once composure was regained, council and staff

agreed that this was a law of uncommon stupidity. Outdoor misters are now legal. However, the council told staff to return in a month with an amendment prohibiting misters that act more like high-flow showers than discrete dispensers of refreshing vapor.

Staff promised to return in a month with clarifying language where appropriate throughout the new law.

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