

Supervisors start push for Temperance Flat project

By Marc Benjamin
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Fresno County supervisors on Tuesday approved the concept of a Joint Powers Authority whose members would include other local governments and water interests supporting construction of Temperance Flat Dam.

The region has fallen behind other groups trying to get part of \$2.7 billion of water storage funding from Proposition 1-A, approved by voters last year. Applications for the money are due at the end of 2016 and the money will be distributed in 2017.

Supervisors deferred action on a resolution that spelled out the way a Joint Powers Authority would work. Supervisors voted 5-0 to support the Joint Powers Authority concept without approving the resolution, which suggested financial obligations and the possibility of incurring debts.

Kings County supervisors on Tuesday also approved the idea of a Joint Powers Authority. County Administrator Larry Spikes said the plan will be discussed by the Kings County Water Commission next week.

Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea said this year's splintering of the Friant Water Authority, which was expected to serve as the lead agency in the Temperance Flat process, has "left a vacuum."

He said county officials received word from Sacramento last month indicating that other organizations seeking money for competing projects have formed authorities and are doing work to submit an application by the end of next year.

"We really can't afford to lose a day in the creation of a JPA (joint powers authority), it's not the final vote of this board or any other board, simply a vote saying we need to move forward to meet the requirements of this proposition to put us in play for this money," he said.

Supervisor Brian Pacheco said the process will eventually provide a mechanism to allow the Valley to apply for the money.

Supervisors Andreas Borgeas and Debbie Poochigian were concerned about the level of detail in the resolution, but Pacheco, Perea and Supervisor Buddy Mendes said the proposal was a template for what may eventually take shape.

15 million

The number of acre-feet lost in the past 30 years because of a lack of water storage at Millerton Lake

Temperance Flat would provide more than 1 million acre-feet of additional water storage that could be distributed throughout the Valley for agriculture, cities and recharge.

Over the past 30 years, more than 15 million acre-feet of water has been lost to the ocean in wet years "because of the inability of existing reservoir capacity at Millerton," said Mario Santoyo, executive director of the Latino Water Coalition.

The east side of the Valley uses about 800,000 acre-feet of water in one farming season, which means 16 to 17 seasons of water was lost because storage was lacking, he said.

Making matters more dire, he said, farmers will pump water from the ground when there is no water allocated for

them.

“We are going to need additional storage and a JPA is required,” he said.

The state Department of Water Resources is now completing rule-making in its application process

“There is a very small time frame to get done a very complex application,” Santoyo said.

Ultimately, the plan is for the county to get input from counties stretching from Merced to Kern and include water agencies and cities in the Joint Powers Authority.

A more detailed plan will return to the board in August.

In other action, supervisors approved raises for the Service Employees International Union. A 5% raise will go into effect next week, 1.5% next year and 2.5% in 2017. The amount matches the 9% employees lost in 2011. The vote was 4-1. Poochigian said she didn't believe the size of the raises was sustainable even though the economy is improving.

Other supervisors disagreed. Borgeas said cutting SEIU salaries was a “cost avoidance” to the county of more than \$150 million. And, he said, the 9% raise through 2017 will allow the county to get out of a state Public Employment Relations Board appeal that could have cost the county tens of millions of dollars more. Borgeas said he believes the raises are “financially sustainable.”

Perea said the county is trying to rebuild a difficult relationship by “taking a responsible pattern of returning pay to our employees.”

SEIU represents nearly two-thirds of the county's 7,200 employees.

Supervisors also supported raises for probation officers, probation services managers and nurses employed by the county without discussion.

In addition, they voted a \$6.7 million increase in the Jail Medical Services budget for Corizon Health, Inc., the county contractor through 2019, raising the total cost of the contract to \$105.5 million. The budget was increased because of requirements from a lawsuit settlement related to improper medical treatment of inmates. The lawsuit, filed by the Prison Law Office in 2011, was settled earlier this year.

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