

Drought is changing Fresno's role forever

By George Hostetter
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The water revolution sparked by the Great Drought took center stage at Thursday's Fresno City Council meeting.

But I almost missed the show.

Let's take this in six steps.

1.) The council heard Public Utilities' Steve Hogg pitch a solar energy plant for the sewer farm west of town. Construction would cost \$10 million. Total cost, including payments on a low-interest state loan, would hit \$14.3 million.

The power would go to the sewer farm's tertiary treatment and disinfection plant (recycled water), the first phase now under construction. Hogg said the city would recover its costs in about 10 years. Ratepayers would foot the bill.

Only one company turned in a bid, although about a dozen took a sniff at the job. Hogg asked the council to OK the contract with MD Energy of Rancho Cucamonga.

The council — led by Council President Oliver Baines and Council Members Lee Brand and Paul Caprioglio — jumped on Hogg. They didn't like getting just one bid. They didn't like the apparent stiffing of local subcontractors. They didn't like paying \$10 million for just two megawatts.

Most of all, they said they didn't like the lack of information on such a key project.

Hogg apologized. He said their questions were answered in the feasibility study. He said he'd get one to them immediately.

This needs a reboot.

Council Member Lee Brand on the sewer farm's proposed solar-energy plant

The hearing was postponed to Aug. 20.

2.) I got to stewing about the feasibility study.

The agenda for council meetings is posted online by the City Clerk's Office at about 4 p.m. the preceding Friday. The posting includes background documents.

The council didn't have the feasibility study because Hogg didn't give it to City Clerk Yvonne Spence.

At this point I recalled the controversy of 2004-06 when the City Council and then-Mayor Alan Autry fought over whether their positions (not necessarily themselves) should get huge pay hikes. The council positions ended up seeing a nearly 50% pay increase (to \$70,170 for the president, \$65,000 for the other six).

The clinching argument: Being a council member is a full-time job.

Back to Thursday. I thought: Did any of those full-time council members call Hogg or Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda and say: "Hey, I need more information!"

I posed that question to Hogg and Esqueda. They said no council member called.

3.) Being in a funk, I didn't pay much attention when the council agreed to spend \$167 million for water pipes.

The pipes will bring San Joaquin River water to the northeast surface water treatment plant and Kings River water to the yet-to-be-built southeast surface water treatment plant. There also will be new pipes in Fresno to bring all that clean water to consumers.

These pipes, plus the southeast surface water treatment plant, are part of Mayor Ashley Swearingin's historic \$429 million upgrade to the city's water system. The council approved the rate hikes to pay for everything in February.

4.) And I didn't pay much attention when the council agreed to a water deal with the Orange Center School District.

The small grade school south of town is in Fresno's sphere of influence. Orange Center's water system, serving about 400 students and staff, is old. The district doesn't have money for a new one. It's surviving now on bottled water.

City Hall came to the rescue. The council approved a deal that connects Orange Center to the city's water system. Orange Center will pay its fair share.

"It's a phenomenal project," Council Member Esmeralda Soria said.

This bill would authorize the state board to order the extension of service to an area that does not have access to an adequate supply of safe drinking water so long as the extension of service is an interim extension of service in preparation for consolidation.

Official analysis of SB 88, now a state law

5.) I spent part of Thursday afternoon in Esqueda's office. I still couldn't understand why council members failed to call about the solar-plant project.

Esqueda wouldn't listen. He said it was Public Utilities' fault, not the council's.

"I gotta go," Esqueda said. "I'm meeting with the county on SB 88."

SB 88 (now a law) gives the State Water Resources Control Board authority to order a strong public water system to serve a nearby community with a failing water system. In other words, something like the Fresno-Orange Center marriage.

Esqueda expects more such marriages.

"We must plan for the future," he said.

6.) Esqueda's rush out the door cleared things up for me.

The big unanswered question during the long debate on Swearingin's \$429 million system upgrade was what Fresno would do with all that water.

A Fresno water system working on all cylinders during a normal rain year would generate well over 200,000 acre-feet of water. Much would come from the two rivers. A big chunk would come from a sophisticated recycled water program.

Fresno was using about 140,000 acre-feet annually in recent water-wasting years. That number is plummeting this year. Front lawns are disappearing, probably never to return.

Why the big push by City Hall and Sacramento to convince Fresnans to buy an improved water-system when ratepayers would never be allowed to consume water like the old days?

The answer: Fresno isn't to be a municipal water system. It's to be a state-controlled regional water provider.

The council was right on Thursday: We need a lot more information.

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