

Fresno Utilities director's bonus fuels fire over water rate hikes

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In delving into Bonusgate, I have some confusion with a particular line on the list of bonuses.

No need here to go into detail on the list (publicly unveiled by The Bee's John Ellis). About a dozen City Hall executives got a total of some \$300,000 in bonuses/deferred compensation in fiscal years 2014-2016.

It appears that most of the money came from the general fund. The general fund is about 30% of the city's \$1 billion annual budget. General fund money is spent at the discretion of elected officials.

Far more than half of the general fund goes to police and fire services. There are never enough general fund dollars to go around.

The list shows a \$10,000 bonus in Fiscal Year 2015-2016 (which began July 1) paid to Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda.

Just about everyone else on the list is connected to the executive branch. A prominent exception is Chief Jerry Dyer.

The presence of Esqueda on the list gnawed at me. But I couldn't figure out why.

Then it hit me on Friday. Public Utilities is an enterprise department. This means the general fund doesn't contribute to the Public Utilities budget. Ratepayers foot most of the bill. (Grants might help.)

The services are residential trash, wastewater, water and community sanitation (i.e. neighborhood cleanup).

As Esqueda often reminds the City Council, Proposition 218 (the state Constitutional amendment approved by voters in 1996) requires ratepayers to fund the cost of these services – "not a penny more, not a penny less."

So, where did Esqueda's \$10,000 bonus come from, the general fund or ratepayers?

This seems like a valid question to me.

If the \$10,000 came from the general fund, and Swearingin felt the bonus was necessary to retain the services of Esqueda (rest assured, I believe Tommy is a most talented administrator and leader, deserving of every dollar he gets), then why did the general fund subsidize a ratepayer responsibility?

And if Esqueda's \$10,000 bonus came from ratepayers, then were Fresnans during the recent two-year controversy over water rates specifically informed that the doubling of their water rates would also pay for the Public Utilities director's bonus?

I sat through all the water-rate hearings in the Council Chamber. I sat through all the oral reports from the city's outside water-rate consultants. I sat through all the public forums at which city officials and outside experts spoke at length about the need for dramatically higher water rates so Fresno in the future would enjoy water security.

I don't recall anyone saying the higher rates would fund a bonus for the Public Utilities director.

I know, I know. City officials on Tuesday held a news conference to explain all the legislative changes afoot to ensure the bonus controversy never happens again.

That is City Hall's way of telling the public to move on.

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