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Water district plans higher rates

By LEIGH MUNSIL

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The general manager of the South Coast Water District outlined a 10-year plan Wednesday to become less reliant on imported water by decreasing imports to 35 percent of its total water supply and getting the rest from groundwater, recycled water and ocean desalination.

In the meantine, however, charges for annual service and monthly water use for the district's customers will have to go up, SCWD officials said during two community forums.

If the rate increase is approved by the board of directors June 25, the average single-family home would pay $19 to $38 more on monthly water and sewage bills starting in July. SCWD serves 42,000 residential and commercial customers in Dana Point, South Laguna and areas of north San Clemente.

General Manager Michael Dunbar said the district imports 80 percent of its water from other sources, primarily the Colorado River and Northern California. But the state, after experiencing a three-year drought, will not be able to help fill in supply gaps for local water districts, he said.

"We are not getting any more water from the state, period," Dunbar said. "It's not going to happen … we're going to have to depend on ourselves."

Board President Richard Dietmeier said, "The strategy for the future is to find reliable sources of water that can be counted on, local sources of water that we can control — water that doesn't have to come 500 miles to visit Dana Point."

Under the district's tiered rate structure, the cost of the rate increase would vary for each household or business, depending on the amount of water used. The rate increase would be repeated three more times, in July 2010, 2011 and 2012.

According to SCWD, a typical family using 12 units of water per month (8,976 gallons) whose current monthly cost is $77 would see its bill increase to $97 in July this year and to about $124 by July 2012.

A family using 20 units of water per month (14,960 gallons) whose current monthly cost is $100 would see its bill increase to $138 this year and to $179 in 2012.

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Terri Walsh, who has lived in Dana Point more than 13 years, said he applauds the SCWD's water-conservation efforts but is concerned about the rates increasing so steeply.

With a fixed-rate service bill of $900 annually and a variable water-use cost of $300, even cutting up to 15 percent of his water use would save only about $45 a year, Walsh said. If the fixed rate increases by 35 percent, he will pay substantially more annually even if he uses less water, he said.

"Given the fact that I'm on fixed income, this is going to have to come from somewhere else," Walsh said. "My pie is only so big."

The extra water money will likely come out of his savings, Walsh said.

In previous years, the district operated in the red and used reserve money to make up the difference in its yearly budget, Dietmeier said. But after changing the rate structure, the finances began to balance out, he said.

"The only reason this water district is solvent today is because we raised rates," he said. "The only reason the state of California is insolvent today is because they did not raise their tax rates.

"There are only two things government does: It taxes and it spends. Sorry, but that's the way it is."

Betty Burnett, SCWD's assistant general manager and legal counsel, said the district is still hearing from customers about the rate increase and will continue to deliberate before the board's June 25 vote.

For more information on the planned rate changes, including charts of the annual service charges and the various residential and commercial usage rates, visit www.scwd.org .

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