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City, POA, merchants consider how to save water

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A resident discusses drought tolerant plants with experts at the recent Water Summit in the Towne Center.

Canyon Lakers may have to brace themselves for higher water rates beginning July 1 if the proposed increase by the Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District is adopted during a public hearing set for next Thursday, June 25. Residents are invited to attend the hearing, which will take place at 4 p.m. at the district office, located at 31315 Chaney St. in Lake Elsinore. The district will adopt the increases unless a majority of residents protest the new rates in writing.

If the rate increase is adopted, those residents who attended the City's Water Summit a few weeks ago may have a leg up on their neighbors after being treated to a wealth of information about ways in which they can conserve water in the face of the state's water crisis. From demonstrations of low flow irrigation devices to seminars offered by EVMWD and Eastern Municipal Water District, residents were provided with real-life solutions to cope with tightening restrictions of the area's most precious resource.

But while the focus of the day's event was to educate and inform the public, the duty to conserve water in Canyon Lake also falls on the shoulders of local government and businesses, as well as the Property Owners Association. After all, how can the community's leaders ask for and expect cooperation from residents if they themselves are not doing their part in conservation efforts? As residents who attended the Water Summit learned, those groups are making concerted efforts to reduce their water usage and not simply saying, "Do as I say, not as I do."

The City of Canyon Lake has installed drip irrigation in all parkways and medians as well as recently replanting the medians with drought-tolerant plants. The City also has taken the extra step of utilizing reclaimed water from the retention basin located next to the Canyon Lake Country Club. Both of these improvements, says City Manager Lori Moss, have resulted in water and cost savings to the City.

The City recycled trimmings from the recent maintenance of median and parkway trees and bushes into wood chips, which were then placed in the median to be used as mulch; mulch helps the soil retain moisture. The City also has taken its conservation efforts indoors, converting all the toilets located in City Hall from water tanks to non-water tanks by retrofitting them with pressurized flush system units that require very little water to operate.

The community's biggest user of water is the Property Owners Association, with acres of parks and common areas as well as the Golf Course under its jurisdiction. POA Operations Manager Paul Johnson says that the Association is currently looking into converting as many of its irrigation heads in common areas as possible to MP Rotator Sprinklers, which can provide a 20 to 40 percent savings over pop-up sprinklers.

In the meantime, several "evapotranspiration" (ET) controllers are being tried out. An ET controller is a control box that delivers only the amount of water needed to a specific area, based on inputs such as historical weather data, plant type and soil grade.

Paul says the feasibility of a water-monitoring program is being studied. Such systems can monitor how much water is needed in each area and adjust irrigation run times based on real-time weather conditions. The system can immediately identify possible leaks or breaks in waterlines, immediately shutting down a zone to minimize the loss of water. Paul indicated that such programs are estimated to save 20 to 30 percent. Until such a program is put into place, Paul says that the POA's landscape contractor, Valley Crest, utilizes an "on-site irrigator" who visually checks common areas for signs of over-watering and adjusts run times accordingly.

The biggest water conservation undertaking likely will be the Golf Course, with a complete review of the irrigation system being conducted this month to help determine what can be done to help reduce the amount of water needed to maintain the condition of the course. In addition, the Green Committee currently is studying the course to determine which areas can be converted from turf to drought tolerant landscaping.

Other steps recently taken by the POA, though on a smaller scale, include the purchase of a water broom used for cleaning the tennis courts, which uses up to 80 percent less water than the conventional method, as well as converting several of the park restrooms to low flush toilets and zero flush urinals.

The Merchant Owners Association, which is responsible for the Towne Center, is also looking to do its part, although the age of the center, which was built in 1968, is somewhat of an impediment, according to MOA board member Greg Hedrick. While the MOA is trying to get as many of the areas on timers as possible, retrofitting the control boxes is a difficult process since automatic timers were not the norm in 1968.

The board is currently in the application process with EVMWD to use reclaimed water, something Greg says they had originally looked into about 10 years ago. At that time, the process was much more stringent, says Greg, because it was not as beneficial to the water district, because water was more plentiful, or to the MOA, because the rates were much lower back then. This time around, however, Greg says the process is much more streamlined and the MOA expects approval to be much easier to obtain.

Another application being investigated is replacing the grass in the center with artificial turf. Greg reports that the board is currently studying several types of turf to determine the best in terms of looks and warranty, as well as cost. He points out that artificial turf, while more widely used now than ever before, is still very costly – and, like everyone else, the MOA is currently on a tight budget.