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Hikes needed because of drought, need for sewer renovations

# ESCONDIDO: City increases water, sewer rates despite protests

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Despite objections from coin-operated laundries and residents, Escondido officials will hike water rates by 8 percent on Sept. 1 and increase sewer rates by 5 percent on Jan. 1.

The higher rates, which city officials blamed on the California drought and infrastructure problems at Escondido's sewer treatment plant, will increase the monthly bill for a typical family by $3.28.

But excessive users could face much larger increases because of penalties under a conservation policy implemented in February, city officials said.

Meanwhile, the city has agreed to help reduce greenhouse gases by allowing the methane emitted from its sewer treatment plant to be converted into natural gas as part of a pilot project with San Diego Gas & Electric. If the project is successful, it could be adopted across the state, city officials said.

Also, the city is slated to receive $3.25 million in federal stimulus money to replace thousands of feet of water pipe in the Alexander area, a roughly 4-square-mile zone centered at Felicita Road and Citracado Parkway. The project would create a few dozen jobs for the city.

Before City Council members adopted the water and sewer rate hikes last week, they expressed frustration.

But they explained to angry residents and business owners that they were simply passing on rate hikes from the County Water Authority and the Metropolitan Water District, which provide about 70 percent of the city's water. The other 30 percent comes from the Lake Wohlford reservoir.

Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler said it was important to note that the city was only passing on about half of the rate hikes by the water agencies, explaining that the county recently raised rates by 15.4 percent and that Metropolitan officials approved a 17.5 percent hike.

Residents still complained about confusing bills, unfair treatment and some unintended consequences of the city's conservation policies.

Vivian Doering from the Escondido Woman's Club said being classified as a restaurant has spiked monthly bills at the club from $61 to $235 in just three months.

Roseanne Lindsay, a resident of the elaborately landscaped Hidden Trails neighborhood, said residents are confused by the new city penalties for excessive water use.

Bernard Rubin, who operates a coin laundry in the Vons Plaza at Felicita Avenue and Centre City Parkway, said city policies regarding laundry facilities were unfair and misguided.

He contends that such businesses do not increase water usage because their customers are using less water at home by washing their clothes elsewhere. Rubin also explained that commercial washers are far more efficient that most home washers, meaning that coin laundries actually help the city conserve water.

And Dan Moriarty, who lives in a mobile-home park, said the thousands of Escondido residents living in such parks have no incentive to conserve because they pay a flat fee for water instead getting a bill based on usage.

The council also increased water rates for agricultural users, which make up only 224 of the city's 26,000 water customers. But they use about 34 percent of the water. Agricultural rates will go up 8 percent in February.

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