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Otay water board OKs 20 percent rate hike

New charges take effect on Tuesday

By Anne Krueger
Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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SPRING VALLEY — The Otay Water District board has approved a rate increase of almost 20 percent despite complaints from some customers that they can't afford to pay more for water.

The rate increase, which takes effect Tuesday, was approved Monday by a 4-0 vote. Board president Gary Croucher was absent because he was out of town on business.

District officials say the rate increase is necessary because the Metropolitan Water District, which supplies water to San Diego County through the County Water Authority, is raising its price by 21.1 percent in September. Other increases are projected for 2011 and beyond.

The approval also allows the district to pass on annual rate increases from the Water Authority, and yearly increases of up to 10 percent for Otay's higher costs, for the next five years without holding another public hearing. Otay General Manager Mark Watton said customers still will be notified when a rate increase will go into effect.

The 19.9 percent increase approved by the board will raise a typical customer's bill from $52.54 to $62.27 per month. Otay officials said the district's rates still will be the 10th-lowest out of 23 county water agencies for customers with typical water usage.

The board also approved a 7.2 percent increase in its sewer rates over the next six years. District officials said the higher rate is needed because of increased regulations that require more monitoring of the system.

The Otay Water District serves more than 191,000 residents in southern El Cajon, La Mesa, Rancho San Diego, Jamul, Spring Valley, Bonita, eastern Chula Vista, Eastlake and Otay Mesa.

The public hearing was held under the provisions of Proposition 218, which requires notice of potential rate increases. The district sent about 64,000 notices to property owners and customers, and the increase could not have gone into effect if more than half had filed written protests. The district received 35 protest letters.

Nine people spoke at the hearing to complain about the rates.

Karen Hirr of El Cajon told board members the district should find ways to save money other than raising rates.

“Everyone asks us to dig deeper in our pockets and at some point, there is no more to dig,” Hirr said. “We're reaching that point.”

David Nichols of Spring Valley said he lives on a fixed income and is already trying to conserve water.

“If you don't have it, you can't pay it,” Nichols said. “I'm not looking for mercy, I'm just looking for solutions.”

Board members said they empathized with customers upset about the higher rates, but had to approve the increase because of higher costs.

“I don't expect you to like this 20 percent rate increase,” board member Larry Breitfelder told people at the meeting. “I don't like it. But I want you to know it's done for the public interest.”

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