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Rancho California Water District may bar new connections

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The Press-Enterprise

The Rancho California Water District in Temecula is considering temporarily halting installation of new water meters and water guarantees for new developments.

The proposed moratorium stems from a board member's concern over the district's supplies given California's water shortage. John Hoagland argued that the district's pleas for conservation are compromised when it accepts requests for new water service.

If the moratorium is approved, the district would be the only one in the Inland area to bar new connections, a potentially serious roadblock for development in a region hit hard by the slumping economy.

The district's requests for new meters have dropped from 5,250 in 2005 to 1,067 last year.

The district's board of directors voted 4-3 on Wednesday to schedule a public hearing on Hoagland's proposal. No date has been set.

The board had been poised to vote on the moratorium, but Hoagland said he had learned that a public hearing must be held first. The district serves more than 120,000 people in southwest Riverside County, including Temecula, part of Murrieta and unincorporated areas nearby.

Temecula City Planner Patrick Richardson said that as proposed, the moratorium could stifle development.

While city officials understand the serious nature of the water shortage, a moratorium "seems like a fairly draconian measure without looking at what kinds of impacts to the community" it would have, he said.

Temecula's population has grown from just under 60,000 in 2000 to more than 100,000, though growth has slowed in recent years.

Richardson added that the moratorium raises questions about the future of Splash Canyon Temecula, a water park approved by the city this summer.

The water park has letters from the district stating that water is available but has yet to get meters installed, he said.

Hoagland was not swayed by the argument about stifling growth. He noted the glut of vacant commercial space and available homes in Temecula.

It's not clear how long the proposed moratorium would last.

Next year, the district will update its long-term water supply plan, in which it must show where it will get its

water, how it will conserve water and the projected growth patterns in its service area.

Like the rest of Southern California, Rancho is struggling to maintain adequate water supplies in the face of a long-term drought and difficulty obtaining water from Northern California.

The district's main supplier, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, cut deliveries by 10 percent in July. Metropolitan provides 65 percent of the water for Rancho's existing customers and 100 percent for new water demands, a district staff report states.

Spokesman Bob Muir said Metropolitan is not aware of any of its client districts taking the measures being considered by Rancho.

However, in October 2007, Eastern Municipal Water District in Perris stopped agreeing to serve new projects for six months.

DEMAND DOWN

Eastern officials eventually decided that large industrial and residential projects could be served as long as developers took conservation measures. District spokesman Peter Odencrans said there are no restrictions on water service, although demand from development has dropped 12 percent from two years ago.

Rancho already is phasing out a discount water program for agricultural users and requires homeowners and businesses to water landscaping between 8 p.m. and 7 a.m., with certain exceptions.

Hoagland said the moratorium would help the district maintain credibility. It's awkward to tell customers to save water while approving new requests for service, he told fellow board members.

He said he has taken heat from his neighbors for Splash Canyon Temecula.

"Politically, it totally undermines our ability to ask our customers to save water because clearly we have enough because we're building a water park," he said.

Richardson said the water park, which would be open three months a year, would use less water than other types of projects that could be built on the site. In the park's off-season, the water would be drained and added to the area's aquifer, he said.

'HOLISTIC APPROACH'

While Hoagland's colleagues praised him and lamented the state's water woes, some said a moratorium was premature.

"We need to come back with a holistic approach, rather than a specific action," said William Plummer.

Board member Lawrence Libeu said a decision on the moratorium should be delayed until there has been more study and discussion.

"We need to take a little more than a month before we get to that," he said.

Libeu, Plummer and Lisa Herman voted against scheduling the hearing, while Hoagland, Ben Drake, Ralph Daily and Stephen Corona voted for it.

Temecula City Manager Shawn Nelson, who spoke at the meeting, praised the board for delaying action. He called the moratorium a very extreme concept.

"This significant step demands a collaborative approach from the community," Nelson said.

Murrieta Community Development Director Mary Lanier, who also spoke at the meeting, said while the need to save water is understandable, "we need to look at all the alternatives."

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