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# REGION: New-water-service moratorium on tap

Rancho California plan would pause while state addresses crisis

**By DAVE DOWNEY - ddowney@californian.com | Posted: Saturday, October 31, 2009 6:35 pm**

An agency that delivers water to 120,000 people in Temecula, Murrieta and Wine Country will consider next week taking the extraordinary step of temporarily denying service to new customers until Sacramento crafts a legislative solution to California's water crisis.

A Rancho California Water District board member says it's time to stop delivering water to new homes and businesses because the agency is maxed out trying to meet the demands of its 40,000 existing customers.

"I don't consider this a moratorium," board member John Hoagland, architect of the sweeping plan, said in a telephone interview last week. "I consider this a pause to encourage the Legislature to solve this problem so that we can see where we are going."

This problem is the uncertainty swirling around the future of California's water supply.

The state is in the grips of a three-year drought that has been drying up reservoirs. But the problem goes much deeper than that.

A significant amount of the snow that falls on the Sierra Nevada and flows into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta no longer is shipped south. A federal court order aimed at protecting the tiny delta smelt fish, which tends to get chopped up in the delta's giant pumps, is preventing a huge amount of water from reaching Riverside County ---- and will continue to do so even in wet years.

Officials for Temecula, Murrieta and the county say they are well aware of the uncertainty about long-term supply. But they maintain that shutting off the tap is a draconian response, one that could cripple the local economy at a time when it is struggling to bounce back from recession.

"That does not lend itself well to a positive forecast for economic recovery," said Vern Lauritzen, chief of staff for Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Stone of Temecula.

Temecula Mayor Maryann Edwards said such a move could sour the area's reputation, further eroding the economy.

"Do we want tourists not coming here because they don't think they can get a drink of water?" she asked.

What's more, Edwards said, a policy of turning away new service could doom crucial projects that hold the promise of bringing hundreds of jobs to a community built largely on long-distance commuting. And she said it could have implications for the planned hospital, Cal State San Marcos campus and water park, and the civic center under construction in Old Town.

On Friday, Edwards, Stone and Murrieta Mayor Gary Thomasian sent off a letter to district board Chairman Ralph Daily outlining their concerns about the proposal.

The reality measure

Hoagland countered that his plan should have little effect on the economy, given the hundreds of foreclosed homes that need to be snatched up and thousands of square feet of office and retail space that need to be filled up before building rebounds.

"So, maybe, this is a real good time ... to do something like this," Hoagland said.

And, he said, "This is not an anti-growth measure; it's a reality measure."

Hoagland, noting farmers' water supplies have been cut back 30 percent and homes are being asked to conserve 10 percent, said Rancho California can't deliver all the water its existing customers want, let alone provide for new customers.

The district distributes 75,000 acre-feet of water annually, about two-thirds of which comes from distant rivers in Northern California and the Rocky Mountains. The rest comes from local ground water and Vail Lake.

New customers are served exclusively with imported river water ---- the source that is uncertain for the future.

The plan is going to be the subject of a public hearing set for 6 p.m. Nov. 9 at the district headquarters, 42135 Winchester Road, Temecula.

If adopted, the plan immediately would halt the practice of issuing letters to developers indicating the district has an adequate supply to serve their developments, something that is required by state law before they can build.

The district also would, at once, cease to issue new meters for houses and businesses.

Hoagland's proposed resolution does not set an end date. But Matt Stone, district general manger, said it sets the stage for possibly discontinuing the policy when the district completes a new urban water management plan, which is required every five years. The next one is due in 2010.

The plan is similar to a strategy Eastern Municipal Water District employed in 2008.

Eastern, which serves 675,000 people in the Interstate 215 corridor, stopped issuing will-serve letters to developers in 2008, and a plan to bring a Skechers shoe plant to east Moreno Valley was held up because of that. Peter Odencrans, a district spokesman, said the policy was discontinued six months later and eventually Sketchers was given the green light to proceed.

In Eastern's case, the moratorium did not affect new water meters for businesses and houses built within projects the district already had agreed to supply, Odencrans said.

Reducing the water footprint

However, the Hoagland plan won't be the only proposal to go to the Rancho California board next week. Stone said his staff is drafting an alternate plan that would provide a way for developers to get the delivery assurances they need.

But Stone said developers would have to take measures to reduce use, such as installing high-efficiency sprinklers and low-water-use landscaping. And he said developers may be asked to pay fees to fund conservation or recycled-water programs that effectively eliminate the need for the district to find new potable water for their projects.

Conservation is something existing customers have become quite familiar with, as it is a theme that has dominated the last several months with all the talk about drought.

In the midst of that, Hoagland said, it is unfair to give conserved water to new development.

"It's the conservation aspect of this that makes me really uncomfortable," Hoagland said. "The point is to reduce the footprint of water use. However, if we take on new service responsibilities, we really haven't reduced the water footprint."

In the letter Edwards, Thomasian and Jeff Stone wrote, they said they were uncomfortable with "the manner in which this proposal found its way" onto the district's Oct. 7 agenda.

Edwards said in an interview Friday that she did not know about the plan until a couple hours before that board meeting. She quickly phoned City Hall and asked some officials to attend, and they raised concerns about the initiative.

"They may have gone ahead and voted to pass it that morning, as far as we know," if city officials had not attended, she said.

Matt Stone, the water district's general manager, declined to respond to the criticism.

But Stone said the agency realizes there is much interest in the plan, and that's why it scheduled a special meeting for Nov. 9 ---- at night ---- to give as many people as possible a chance to weigh in.

Edwards also said she was unhappy because the district abruptly canceled a private meeting scheduled last Monday between the district and officials from the county and two cities.

"They refused to meet with us," Edwards said. "Never in my 15 years of volunteer and public service have I had a municipality or government agency refuse to meet."

Stone said the district didn't feel it would be appropriate for elected officials to be in attendance. He said the district would schedule another meeting between staff members exclusively.

"We're fine with having a staff-to-staff meeting," Stone said. But he said the presence of elected officials "might in some way compromise the process."

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