

Goleta delays decision on water rate increase

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Following a tongue-lashing from residents and farmers, the Goleta Water District has postponed consideration of a 4 percent rate hike to allow more public input.

In a 5-0 vote Tuesday night, district directors delayed any decision until June 7. The proposal comes as part of a tentative \$19 million 2006-07 spending plan, and amid worry over growing operating costs tied to inflation.

Rising water rates are a concern across the South Coast: The city of Santa Barbara is considering a 3.5 percent hike to pay for water treatment plant construction, while the Carpinteria Valley Water District has suggested a 5 percent increase to service debt and for the treatment plant it shares with Santa Barbara.

Goleta's delay followed a verbal barrage from critics worried that financial pressures will drive farmers to develop their lands, which would reduce open space

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valued across the Goleta Valley. They complained that unlike Santa Barbara, which announced its proposed hike six weeks before a June 20 public hearing, Goleta Water revealed its plan only Friday.

Mary Whalen of the Coalition for Sensible Planning sprang to her feet and interrupted the board after director John Cunningham and colleagues said they learned of the proposal from agency staff on Thursday, raising questions about the depth of their involvement in day-to-day operations.

"Even Mrs. Cunningham said, 'Four percent, when did you find out about that?'" Mr. Cunningham acknowledged. "I didn't know anything about it at all."

"I'm standing back here astounded," Ms. Whalen interjected moments later. "You are supposed to be our overseers. Your obligation to us, the public, is to take the time to make sure what is proposed in there is in the best interests of the public."

Despite delaying their decision, directors said they spent the weekend reviewing the proposal.

"We just got through putting together the budget," director Lynette Mills said. "It's not like we held it back for months."

If approved, the rate boost would be the second such increase in two years, and because of the postponement, it would likely take effect Aug. 1 instead of July 1.

Households in the district pay an average monthly bill of \$52.75. This would jump by \$2.11. Households using fewer than 2,992 gallons a month through a 3/4-inch meter would not be affected, which officials said could help seniors on tight budgets.

Last year, the district increased residential water rates by 8 percent and farm water rates by 5 percent. Such increases could become an annual occurrence, officials say.

In addition, district directors will consider a 4 percent increase to the

agency's "new water supply charge," a one-time fee for water hookups first implemented in 1997 to help pay for a pipeline linking the South Coast to the State Water Project. The charge, affecting commercial and agricultural properties, would rise from \$25,475 to \$26,240 per 325,851 gallons of water, an amount known as an acre-foot.

Officials base the proposed rate hike and service charge boost on a 4.7 percent increase in the consumer price index for Los Angeles and Riverside counties, and an equal increase in an index measuring the cost of construction materials. This comes amid ongoing Goleta water facility improvements.

In March, district directors abandoned a proposal to change how its "new water service charge" for agriculture is calculated — a decision farmers and open-space activists considered a victory.

District director Harry DeWitt said Tuesday that the rate increase would amount to 4 cents on every 750 gallons of water. He questioned how farmers could complain, especially since the district would continue to deliver their water below cost.

Any new construction on agricultural lands would come from the farmers themselves, he said, not financial pressures related to water costs.

In response, farmer Jay Ruskey, who manages several properties, said every penny matters.

"It may be pennies, but right now we are counting those pennies," Mr. Ruskey said, citing labor costs as particularly difficult. "Labor is hard to find."

Mr. Ruskey suggested that the district prepare a three-to-five-year projected budget to prevent future surprises.

The Goleta Water District serves 77,000 people west of Santa Barbara to El Capitan, an area of approximately 29,000 acres bound on the south by the ocean and on the north by the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains.

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