

Nipomo water vote overturned

By Jerry Bunin
Telegraph-Tribune

Voters in Nipomo lost an election Tuesday, three weeks after winning it in the voting booth.

Before an unruly and uncontrolled crowd, the Nipomo Community Services District voted 3-2 to ignore the Nov. 5 election results.

The district board of directors voted to repeal a section of an ordinance, passed unanimously in June, in which the board

agreed to abide by the election results. The directors will tell the county that Nipomo wants to join the State Water Project.

Only 29 percent of the district's 2,324 registered voters participated in the election. They opposed state water by a 24-vote margin, 349 to 325.

Board members and many speakers Thursday claimed the small turnout and a flier mailed out late in the campaign — which some called inaccurate — justified bucking the vote.

Overthrowing the will of the voters

sparked an extremely heated debate. Tempers flared as the temperature rose in the tiny, old warehouse where the district meets.

The audience filled every seat, lined the walls and clogged the aisles. People booed, badgered, interrupted and screamed at speakers they didn't agree with and applauded and cheered for those they supported.

Throughout the two-hour hearing, speakers frequently turned their backs to the board and addressed each other. A steady

buzz filled the room as audience members argued among themselves, with small skirmishes sometimes escalating into multiple, simultaneous yelling matches.

They shouted about doing what was best for Nipomo, growth vs. no growth, the haves vs. the have-nots, what state water would cost and if it was reliable enough to pursue, if Nipomo had other possible water sources and the nature of democracy. Some claimed that disregarding the

Please see Nipomo, Page A-13

Nipomo

Continued from A-1

voters' will violated the Constitution. Others objected to allowing a small group of voters to decide the fate of thousands. And a few complained because they owned property and businesses in the district but couldn't vote because they didn't live there.

The board was generally quiet, answering a few questions and finally voting without any debate on what had been said by the audience.

Directors David Manriquez, Kathleen Fairbanks and Alex Mendoza voted to reject the election while Gordon Gracia and Steven Small opposed repealing the previous ordinance.

After the decision Tuesday, Manriquez said privately that the election represented just activists who were vehemently against state water, not the real sentiment of district voters.

"I'm as patriotic as anybody. A vote is a vote. I understand that," he said. "I just don't think we got a consensus of what the whole community really wanted."

Fairbanks told a reporter that her decision came down to reality vs. principle.

"People want and need water," she said. "What do we say to them? That this is a democracy. Too bad! You can't have water."

Mendoza said the Tuesday meeting and its results were a truer form of democracy than the election.

"I voted my conscience," he said. "Doing what can best serve this area, that is democracy. Anyone who disagrees can run against me in the next election and replace me. That is democracy."

The Nov. 5 election was undemocratic, according to the ordinance passed Tuesday, because of the small turnout and a flier distributed by the Citizens Planning Alliance.

The flier, the ordinance said, used "scare tactics at the last minute" and contained misleading information about the costs and availability of state water.

Two members of the non-profit group defended the flier Tuesday as accurate and fair.

"Should I have sent it to you guys ahead of time so you could review it?" Charles Gulyash asked sarcastically. Because so few people voted in the last presidential election, he asked, "Should we toss George Bush out of office?"

Dozens of different figures were tossed around about the cost of state

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**— David Manriquez,
CSD director**

water, desalting water and the district's water needs.

"Everyone's entitled to their own opinion. I don't believe they're entitled to their own facts," district resident David Putnam said, urging the board to make a decision.

Bill Vincent, who lives near but not in the district, drew the biggest cheer when he complained about the contradictory information floating through the meeting.

"Take the heat," he told the board. "You got it one way or another. Make the decision what's best for Nipomo."

The ordinance approved Tuesday needs another vote in two weeks and then 30 days must pass before it actually becomes law.