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'We never set out to deceive anyone'

Nipomo's just glad somebody cares

By Jerry Bunin
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NIPOMO — Water is causing a firestorm here.

"This is not an easy situation," said board Chairman David Manriquez. "We never set out to deceive anyone. We're doing what we think is best for Nipomo."

Before the board voted two weeks ago to overturn the voters and ask for state water, he said, no one seemed to care what the board did for Nipomo.

He said the resulting controversy has been good for the town and democracy because people are finally getting involved in choosing the community's future.

Some citizens don't agree.

They are upset because the will of the voters is being undermined or because they don't want state water. Plans are being made to challenge the district's action in court or in future elections.

"The people I've heard from," said state water opponent Charles Gulyash, "are infuriated."

They are talking, he said, about launching a recall to remove board members from office or placing an initiative on a future ballot to force the board to follow election results.

"First the board said the election was binding," Gulyash said, "and now it isn't because they don't like the result. That's terrible. It's undemocratic."

State water opponent Paul Luiz

agreed.

"The board has definitely lost the public's trust," he said. "The people have no faith in government. We took part in the democratic process and it gets thrown back in our faces."

"We're being treated like children," he said. "We do what we think is best and someone says, 'It doesn't count. We know what is best for you.'"

Nipomo resident Jack Swords is worried that the board has lost sight of who it serves.

"Now they are responsive to development interests outside the district instead of being responsible to residents inside the district," he said. "It looks like we'll have to wait for the next election."

The turbulence began in June, when the board unanimously agreed

that the election results would be binding on the district.

After the election, the board was bombarded by people who wanted state water and objected to having communitywide public policy set by such a small number of voters.

Manriquez said the small turnout illustrated the public apathy plaguing Nipomo.

Hardly anyone comes to general board meetings, he said, and very few attended informational workshops the district held on the State Water Project.

"Until this situation," he said, "the people didn't care what we did as long as the water was flowing."

"We had to go searching for people to sit on the board because there was such a lack of interest when someone

moved or retired."

There was no campaign in November for the two available seats on the board, Manriquez noted, because no one challenged the incumbents, Steven Small and Gordon Gracia.

The lack of interest, said director Alex Mendoza, made it hard to govern Nipomo. "I'm glad to have this kind of response," he said, noting that this is the first time district meetings were crowded in the year since he was appointed to the board.

Director Small reported being surprised that even more people haven't gotten involved since last week's vote.

"I thought I'd get more phone calls," he said. "But maybe I'm not because I was the only one to vote against it (changing the election's effect.)"

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