

# In Nipomo, voters just don't count

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NIPOMO — Something really strange almost happened in Nipomo last week.

Maybe it was normal and I'm just being naive or simple-minded again.

I get really confused every time I think about trying to write a story explaining how anyone could win an election twice and still lose.

I would have written this as a news story if the Nipomo Community Services District had placed a second measure on the ballot of a special May 19 election about the State Water Project.

Although the district Board of Directors decided against a second measure, I was so astonished by the situation that I was torn between an overwhelming desire to write the story and no idea how to make the twisted saga make sense.

I was equally relieved and disappointed when City Editor Mike Stover said to skip the news story because space was tight in the newspaper that day and the board didn't really take any action.

He suggested a column. Columns are a more subjective way to report what is happening. Columns can be quite useful when the subject is emotional, such as possible political chicanery.

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# Nipomo

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I don't know how else to describe people who seem determined to circumvent the democratic process again.

The Nipomo directors started the circumvention, but not the latest turn.

Last June, they unanimously passed a resolution making the November election binding, but changed their mind after state water lost by a narrow margin, 356 to 328, in an election where only 29 percent of those eligible voted.

So the directors repealed the resolution making the election binding. That angered a group of people who successfully circulated a referendum requiring the board to either go along with the election results or hold a new one on whether the first one should be binding.

The board decided on the second election.

Some people weren't happy with that because they wanted the election to focus on whether Nipomo needs state water. Instead, the ballot measure will ask voters whether they support ignoring the first election.

But there wasn't much they could do to change the ballot and that seemed to be the end of that.

I thought the story would lie low until the election approached. I wasn't even planning to attend the Nipomo meeting on Feb. 19 until I saw an item listed on the agenda about placing a second measure on the ballot.

On the surface, the second resolution seemed simple: "Should the district contract for 2,000 (or 1,500) acre-feet of state water?"

But nothing would have been simple if it had passed. The ramifications

confused the audience and at least two directors.

The news media and audience had to force Arthur Shaw, the district's attorney, to explain that if both measures passed, the board could choose to ignore the one making the first election binding and follow the measure allowing the board to contract for state water.

Most of the audience was dumbfounded. It seemed impossible. Voters could reject state water twice in binding elections and be ignored twice.

Director Katie Fairbanks made a motion to put the second measure on the ballot.

"I really want to know what the majority of the people want," Fairbanks said.

She was, however, alone.

No director but Fairbanks wanted to vote on it even after the wording was watered way down.

So it died. But feelings it generated won't. I, for one, am really suspicious.

I suspect the second ballot measure would have been approved if the media and a few residents hadn't been there to question it.

Nipomo would certainly be better off knowing whether the majority of people want State Water.

A 29 percent voter turnout doesn't represent anything but political apathy. The district needs water. Most of its major wells are on property outside the district and could be lost in court battles.

Nevertheless, the district created enough of a controversy by ignoring the first election. It would have created a nuclear confrontation if the directors had been allowed to ignore the second election.