



Matthew Liddi/Telegram-Tribune

Deanna Nix empties a bucket as the Oceano women's team participates in the bucket brigade drill during the Firefighters Muster, held over the weekend in Oceano. Firefighters from around the state got together for the old-fashioned event, which featured a barbecue and a series of drills with vintage equipment.

Nipomo vote: Round 3 of main event

By Jerry Bunin
Telegram-Tribune

NIPOMO — The State Water Project divides this rural community. The second election on joining the project probably won't fix all the cracks that developed here since the first election was overturned.

Some see the election as a vote on state water and the community's

Analysis

future. Others feel it's a fight to preserve democracy.

Even people who agree Nipomo should take state water disagree on how much water the area will eventually need.

Nipomo Community Service District officials further muddled the water by deciding to pursue the first annexation in eight years while they are trying to convince voters Nipomo needs state water for unavoidable future growth.

Everyone seems to disagree on how much state water should cost.

And to further confuse things, people who want to vote "No" on state water in the May 19 election will actually have to vote "Yes."

A "Yes" vote will repeal an ordinance the district passed last December so the first election wouldn't be binding.

The complicated battle has a long and growing history.

Preliminary skirmishes began last

State water: No use to Nipomo?

NIPOMO — Even most opponents of the State Water Project seem to agree this community will need more water.

But they don't think state water is the answer.

Nipomo's biggest water problem, said Nipomo Community Services District General Manager Ryder Ray, is that most of the water it gets now comes from wells outside district boundaries.

District officials, he said, fear they could lose their biggest wells if people who own the land NCS D pumps from go to court to protect their own water.

State water opponent Charles Gulyash said Nipomo has legitimate water needs, but should pursue other sources such as saltwater

distillation. Nipomo can continue to pump from wells, Gulyash said, until enough information is gathered to decide whether desalting is an option.

That thinking concerns Ray.

"We're not over the (ground water) basin, so we don't have any overlying rights," he said. "You'd have a proprietary right to pump from your property before we did, if we both have wells there."

"We'd probably have to go to court to prove whose well is doing the damage," he said, noting there are four private water companies and numerous private wells sucking water from a large ground water basin.

No court actions are pending,

Ray said, but Nipomo needs more water even if no one challenges the district's pumps.

NCS D can now pump 2,800 acre-feet per year, but only uses 1,300 acre-feet to serve about 1,850 homes with about 4,500 people, he said. But the district will need much more, Ray said.

By 2020, the district population should top 20,000 and include nearly 6,700 homes, said Jamie Lopes, an associate county planner supervising the current update of the county General Plan for the Nipomo area.

Nipomo will need nearly 4,800 acre-feet a year to serve that many people, said Ray, noting the 1,500 acre-feet of state water the district wants won't be enough by itself.

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June when district directors unanimously agreed to hold a binding election on joining the state project.

But the directors, who all favor getting state water, changed their mind in December after Nipomo voters rejected the project by a 356-to-328 margin in November.

The directors decided the election shouldn't be binding because only 29 percent of the eligible voters participated and because of allegedly inaccurate information in a flyer mailed

by state water opponents.

That infuriated state water opponents.

They formed Nipomo Citizens for Democracy and successfully launched a referendum requiring the district either to honor the first election or hold a new one so voters could say if the first one should be binding.

The district decided to hold a second election but had to hire a private company to run it because

means more water. "I know a lot of people are offended by what the board did, but we are in the same situation as San Luis Obispo," Manriquez said.

(The San Luis Obispo City Council voted last week to pursue state water, although a non-binding election last year opposed joining the project. "We can't keep people out," he said. "People have to look at what Nipomo will need in the long run.")

This election is about the future, not democracy, Manriquez said. "That is a nice rallying cry, but we didn't really take anyone's vote away or say their vote wasn't any good.

"We just changed a clause (in an ordinance)," said the 19-year Nipomo resident, "that said the election was binding.

"A lot of people may not agree with me. I'm not asking them to agree with me," said Manriquez, a board member since 1983. "I'm asking them to look at the future of the community."

State water opponent Paul Luiz vehemently disagrees with Manriquez.

"He told me personally: 'This is going to be a binding election,'" Luiz said about Manriquez. "He lied to me. He just flat lied to me."

This election should be about democracy, said Luiz, a third generation county resident. "We voted on state water back in November and the merits and demerits were hashed out then."

The only questions left "should be

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Nipomo

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about democracy. Is it right for government to overturn an election because they don't like the outcome? What are we supposed to do? Keep voting on things until we get it right?"

Charles Gulyash, who co-founded the Nipomo citizens group with Luiz and others, agreed democracy should be the issue, but admits the election will be a vote on state water.

Even people who want more water for Nipomo should oppose state water because it is too expensive and unreliable, said Gulyash, who wrote a flyer NCSO officials said was inaccurate.

He just mailed another flyer containing a lot of the same information.

"From the very beginning, I haven't seen any piece of the first flyer that wasn't accurate, Gulyash said. "State water is a bad buy."

Van Laurn, in charge of the project for the county for most of the 1980s, said state water could cost Nipomo far more than the county now claims.

Nipomo could pay \$900 to \$1,150 per acre-foot, said Laurn, who claims he was demoted and forced to leave the county Engineering Department because he wound up opposing state water.

Deputy County Engineer Glen Priddy, who replaced Laurn on the state project, said his predecessor's cost figures are too high.

But the final cost of state water is still in flux, Priddy said. The bill each community will pay depends on how many sign up and if the county Board of Supervisors agrees to request any unallocated reserve.

Costs will rise if there are unallocat-

ed reserves, he said, because the agencies who sign up for state water must pay the full cost to build a water treatment plant, but will get money back if others join the project later.

The county has 25,000 acre-feet reserved, but only 3,000 acre-feet have been officially claimed by Tuesday, said Priddy who estimated the county will have 12,000 acre-feet unallocated.

Local water agencies must tell the board by May 27 if they want state water and how much.

If the supervisors agree to take all 25,000 acre-feet and have 6,000 acre-feet unallocated, Priddy said, state

'State water is a bad buy.'

— Charles Gulyash, Nipomo's leading critic of state water

water would cost Pismo Beach and Oceano \$600 to \$700 per acre-foot and Nipomo \$700 to \$750.

Costs could also vary slightly depending on plans the state has for adding to the project.

Every water agency that joins, he said, would have to pay a share of future construction costs. That could add \$50 per acre-foot to the cost of state water in this county and more if the Peripheral Canal project is revived.

An acre-foot equals 326,000 gallons and is enough to serve a family of four to five for a year.

County should look west, n

Poly professor says

information from the county about desalting.

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