

Cal Cities rate hike plan stirs Nipomo

Nipomo ratepayers object to proposal in which they had no ballot voice

By Jerry Bunin
Telegram-Tribune

NIPOMO — The State Water Project continues to stir up Nipomo.

Citizens served by the Cal Cities Water Co. are trying to organize a protest against proposed rate hikes that could increase their water bills by 45 percent.

The citizens are asking for information they aren't entitled to, said Cal Cities area manager Roger Brett, and they will soon have a chance to state their opinions on the rate hike.

The state Public Utilities Commission, which regulates Cal Cities, is planning two public hearings next month so the community and state officials representing the public interest can challenge the proposed rate hike.

Cal Cities, part of the giant Southern California Water Co. wants the rate hike to pay for 7,900 acre-feet of state water. The company has a contract for the water through Santa Barbara County water agencies.

Scott Trees, one of about 1,200 Nipomo residents served by Cal Cities, said his neighbors think the deal is unfair.

Cal Cities customers in Santa Barbara County and residents of the Nipomo Community Service District had chances to vote on joining the state project, he said. "We did not."

The 10 percent of Cal Cities cus-

tomers who live in Nipomo, Trees said in a letter to the PUC, "feel as though we have had absolutely no voice in this matter."

"We in Nipomo are being asked to subsidize the growth of the suburbs surrounding Santa Maria," he said, referring to voters who favored state water in Orcutt, Sisquoc, Tanglewood, and Lake Marie in northern Santa Barbara County.

He also asked the PUC if Cal Cities, as a regulated monopoly, could refuse his request for a list of local customers. Trees wants their addresses to organize opposition to the rate hike.

Cal Cities customers in Nipomo, Brett said, will have a chance to oppose the hike at the hearing the PUC will hold locally, probably around Sept. 22.

"So it's not as if there will be no opportunity for them to be heard," he said. Company customers, he said, will be notified by mail when the hearing date, time and location are set.

"Our list of customers is not public information," Brett said. "We always get requests from community organizations for the list. But due to the potential liability of that list winding up in the wrong hands and the resulting invasion of privacy, the company has been very reluctant to give it out."

Kyle Devine, a PUC public information officer, said Trees concerns can be raised at the local public hearing and will probably be noted by the staff at a hearing in Los Angeles.

Anyone who can't attend the local hearing or the "evidentiary hearing" in Los Angeles can supply written testimony to the PUC at 107 S. Broadway, Room 5109, Los Angeles, 90012, Atten: Public Advisor.