

# State water: A bad bargain?

New council fears it's a costly growth-inducer that may drain Pismo dry

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Telegram-Tribune

PISMO BEACH — State water will be coming here although most of the City Council has problems with it.

New council members Marian Mellow and John Brown were frustrated Tuesday when City Attorney Fred Clough said Pismo Beach can't back out of contracts it signed with the county last summer for state water.

The two council members elected in November said state water was far too costly, would cause excessive growth and can't be counted on to deliver the water Pismo Beach has contracted for.

The contracts for 1,240 acre-feet of water can't

be broken unless everyone who signed it agreed to it, Clough said, but noted that he hadn't done extensive research on the topic.

"I have no love for the contract we signed either," Mayor Tim Bittner said about the contracts that restrict how local communities can use ground water.

But state water was the best option, said Bittner, who noted that the council studied the alternatives before he joined the majority in a 3-2 vote for state water last May.

Councilman Jim Maroney voted against state water last year, but has changed his mind because of potential earthquake problems with Lopez Lake.

County officials are studying if the lake has to be drained for up 18 months to prevent the dam from sliding away, which would allow 51,000 acre-feet of water to flood the South County.

Lopez's potential problems don't worry Brown and Mellow nearly as much as paying for state water and how it will change Pismo Beach.

State water is not intended for the people

already living here, Brown said, but they will get stuck with the bill if there isn't enough development.

The average city water bill could rise \$14 a month by 1997, he said. State water won't even get here before 1997, Brown said, noting the city will owe \$1.9 million for the water by that time.

But as bad as that could be, he said, it would be even worse if the developers buy state water, build on the promise of using current city water and then state water doesn't arrive and Lopez is drained.

"This water is a growth-inducer," he said.

Mellow agreed.

She worried that the city would allow people to build now to pay for state water and then not have water for them because state water didn't arrive on time.

"It is unreliable," Mellow said.

"We'll need a great deal of development to pay for that water," she said, criticizing the previous council for not putting such a significant issue up to a vote of the public before signing the

contract.

State water will bring "a lot more people, a lot more congestion" to Pismo Beach, Mellow said. "We'll either charge people who live here or allow extensive development to pay for it.

"We'll pay for it whether we get a single drop or not."

Some have already paid for state water and have spent more money because Pismo Beach signed contracts for state water, Jeff Wagner reminded the council Tuesday.

Wagner, representing the proposed Pacific Coast Homes subdivision, said the city's credibility would be seriously undermined if it backed out of a contract just because the council majority changed.

He noted that the subdivision has already given Pismo Beach \$940,000 for 140 acre-feet of its state water allotment and has spent other money because it had a guarantee of water.

"A deal is a deal," said Wagner.

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develops in a "normal" year.

The state began a new water year Oct. 1 with 155 major reservoirs holding approximately 12.7 million acre-feet of water in carry-over storage. On Nov. 1, one month later, the stored supply of water had dropped to 12.1 million acre-feet. Normally, those same reservoirs would be storing twice that amount.

But during the past six years, rain and snowfall has averaged three-fourths of normal, and spring runoff into the reservoirs has been only about half of normal, Roos said. All reservoirs have some stored water that is not accessible, called dead storage, Roos said. In addition, some water must be withheld to meet minimum requirements to protect endangered fish populations.

Roos and Wheeler said that other water must be retained in storage to meet environmental standards in the San Francisco Bay and San Joaquin River Delta and that still more water must be kept in storage to generate

electricity at hydroelectric power plants.

During the first two months of the 1992-93 water year — which account for 20 percent of the rainy season — rain and snowfall in California was 4 percent less than normal, Roos said.

"If we don't get well-above-average precipitation, the runoff's going to be very dismal because the ground is so dry," said Dee Davis of the state drought center. "The grassland, the brush and the trees are going to absorb a lot of the precipitation. We'll need 110 percent rainfall just to get normal reservoir storage."

So far this year, state rainfall is not only well below the long-term average but also below last year's subnormal totals for the period July 1 to Nov. 29.

About two-thirds of the state project's water is used to meet municipal and industrial needs, mostly in Southern California.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the project's biggest customer, said it did not expect to return to mandatory rationing.

It provides nearly two-thirds of the water used by nearly 16 million people in Southern California. The district's actions directly affect its customers, 27 local water agencies serving six counties from Ventura to the Mexican border and inland to Riverside and San Bernardino.

MWD spokesman Rob Hallwachs said he does not expect the district to return to mandatory rationing because "voluntary conservation has been excellent in the past." The district's customers have exceeded requests for at least 10 percent conservation, he said.

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city.

Maroney said he could still be convinced to oppose state water if someone can find another water source. "But I don't see any alternatives right now."

The council will discuss the water issue at its Dec. 15 meeting.

But it will not have city staff prepare a report on legal ramifications of breaking its contract to take state water or on other water sources Pismo Beach could develop if it doesn't take state water.

City Public Works Director Jim Ashcraft told Mellow that preparing a staff report would require a great deal of time and work by himself and City Attorney Fred Clough.

Mellow said she didn't want to put

the staff through that much labor unless at least three council members wanted to reconsider the state water contract.

Maroney and council members Dick Morrow and new Mayor Tim Bittner said nothing.

The issue was about to die when Brown said he at least wanted the entire council to discuss it.

When the council meets in two weeks, it will also discuss a decision the old council made at its last meeting to give a raise to a dozen employees.

Mellow objected to giving employees a raise in mid-year, outside the normal budget process, and to the kinds of cities studied in a salary comparison survey used to decide if Pismo Beach's pay scale was fair.