

Water still an issue hanging over Nipomo High School

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NIPOMO — Representatives of the Community Services and Lucia Mar Unified School districts, who playfully shoveled dirt into the air while breaking ground for Nipomo High School last month, now are lobbing accusations at each other.

At stake is the new school's opening date and the education of students who labor daily in terribly overcrowded conditions. A lawsuit has been threatened.

If trustees of the two districts do not forge a water agreement soon, the school may not open as scheduled in the fall of 2002, said Mike Sears, the school district's deputy superintendent for business.

The disagreement is rooted in "wheeling" charges — the cost to move water from one site to another. The school district plans to pump water from a well at nearby Dana School to the new high school on North Thompson Road.

In a preliminary agreement, services district general manager Doug Jones estimated the wheeling cost at 10 cents per 100 cubic feet. On the night the school board was to sign a final amendment to the 1999 agreement, Jones announced that actual wheeling charges would be 54 to 79 cents per 100 cubic feet. That would increase school district costs tens of thousands of dollars.

The new figures are based on a water study funded by the school district and undertaken by Boyle Engineering Inc., an international firm based in Ventura. The report, commissioned as part of the 1999 agreement between the districts, includes information about costs and effects of a potential hook up.

The higher charges in the report result from the lack of on-site water storage at the high school, Jones said, and the fact the well at Dana School will not be able to accommodate peak demand — at which

point the NCSD will have to supply some of its own water to the schools.

The report arrived the day before the school district was to vote, and was released to the school board during its meeting.

Things quickly reached a boiling point. Sears said Lucia Mar had been blindsided by hidden costs. Jones countered that it was the school board's haste in attempting to secure a contract that led to incorrect costs being plugged into the original version.

Jones said he made the 10-cents-per-100 estimate under pressure from school district staff, which was pushing for hard data. "The (Lucia Mar) staff knew initial figures were guesstimated," he said. "The school district was in a hurry. When you get in a hurry, you get problems."

Sears denied that Lucia Mar knew the 10-cent figure was a guess.

"This (increase) was absolutely a surprise," he said. "These numbers are unacceptable. They are significantly higher than what we had agreed to."

The school board ultimately voted to sign the contract containing the 10-cent wheeling charge. Representatives of the NCSD have yet to sign the document, according to board member Mike Winn, because trustees want to review final costs from the Boyle report.

The NCSD, as a non-profit organization, does not stand to gain from higher wheeling costs, according to Jones. Unless the school district can justify receiving a lower rate than the NCSD charges others in similar circumstances, he added, it will have to pay the increased rates.

Lucia Mar's Sears said the school district is seeking to resolve the contract conflict but will continue exploring other ways to get water to the high school.

"We have time now," he said, "but if this drags on months and months, all bets are off (with the NCSD)."