

Over the past 49 days, 209 letters were mailed or dropped off at the Nipomo Community Services District office in protest of a proposed water increase, the district's first in nearly three years.

Another five typed — and in one case, hastily scribbled — letters were submitted Wednesday during the district board's meeting.

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But when the final vote count was tallied, the 214 protests received were not nearly close enough to stop a water rate increase from going forward. The board unanimously approved the increase, which will take effect Nov. 1.

Rates will increase by an average of 9.5 percent a year for five years by charging a fixed rate for each account, and then tiered rates based on the amount of water

consumed.

That average increase would total 57.4 percent after the five years, accounting for compounding.

District officials have said the increase is necessary to cover ongoing operations and maintenance costs of the water system and to stop spending reserve funds.

The district started this fiscal year July 1 with a projected budget deficit of \$600,000 in its water fund, which would be filled with reserves, district General Manager Michael LeBrun said.

The district's last rate increase started Jan. 1, 2009, based on a rate study the agency's board had approved in 2005. The district currently has 4,168 connections — about 82 percent are residences — providing water to about 12,200 people.

To stop the rate increase, about half the property owners or tenants, or 2,080 people, would have had to protest. Only one written protest per parcel is allowed under Proposition 218, a 1996 law approved by California voters that allows for public protest of various government levies.

More than 30 residents attended Wednesday's board meeting, and about half of them implored the board to stop or reduce the rate increases.

"I think this is the absolute wrong time to be raising water rates," said Nipomo resident Walter Guthrie, who spent \$20,000 a few years ago ripping up his lawn and replacing it with native plants to reduce his water bill. His last bi-monthly bill was \$274.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's got to be another way to look at this. Let's look at operating expenses," he said. "Let's look at pensions. Let's cut the fat."

Mark Parke, a Nipomo resident and pastor at Faith Life Community Church, urged the board to drop the increases to 3 or 5 percent per year.

"I know a 10 percent increase will really hurt a lot of people in the community," he said.

District officials say the average single-family residential customer uses 40 units of water, or 29,920 gallons, every two months. That customer's bill would increase 9.9 percent to \$99.01 from \$90.12.

But a residential customer using 149,600 gallons of water, for example, would see the bimonthly bill increase 42 percent, to \$764.81 from \$538.12.

That does not include a \$6.32 charge to pay for litigation over pumping rights from the

Santa Maria groundwater basin, which stretches from Santa Maria into southern San Luis Obispo County.

The rate increase does not include any funds for the Nipomo district's proposed pipeline project, which would bring water to the community from Santa Maria.

Construction on the pipeline is estimated at \$25.3 million. A state grant is expected to cover \$2.3 million; the rest could be funded through an assessment district of about 8,000 parcel owners, including residents of the Nipomo district and those served by three other large water purveyors on the Mesa.

Reach Cynthia Lambert at 781-7929. Stay updated by following @SouthCountyBeat on Twitter.
