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NIPOMO NEWS

Bills would change water rules process

By Mike Hodgson / Associate Editor / mhodgson@theadobepress.com

Two bipartisan bills that would alter the way state and regional water boards develop regulations were announced last week at a town hall meeting sponsored by Sen. Sam Blakeslee in Arroyo Grande.

“The question before our community is not whether to protect water quality, but how to protect water quality,” Blakeslee said in a statement before the Feb. 9 meeting.

A Republican from San Luis Obispo, Blakeslee said he is partnering with Sen. Rod Wright, D-Inglewood, to jointly author Senate bills 964 and 965 that will ensure the process is more science-based, collaborative and accountable.

“Our partnership on these bills sends a strong message that this isn’t a Democrat issue or a Republican issue,” Blakeslee said.

Five people representing construction, agriculture and tourism industries formed a panel to discuss how proposed water quality regulations will affect their communities and industries.

Audience members also were allowed time to share their own stories and concerns at the two-hour meeting in the Lucia Mar Unified School District board room.

Blakeslee said SB 964 would require State Water Quality Control Board and regional water boards to follow Administrative Procedures Act guidelines.

The Administrative Procedures Act contains requirements for public notices, public comment periods, economic analyses and review standards to justify a proposed program or policy.

Currently, the state and regional water boards are exempt from the act’s requirements, although all other agencies within the California Environmental Protection Agency are not, Blakeslee said.

Under existing law, programs like the stormwater runoff permits and a proposed conditional waiver of discharge requirements are exempt from the analysis required by the act.

A revised conditional waiver proposed by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board has been strongly criticized by agricultural interests for onerous monitoring and reporting procedures that would be excessively expensive.

The waiver is designed to control runoff from agricultural operations that enters rivers, creeks, lakes and ponds.

SB 965 would remove barriers that prevent community members from giving regulators information about the impacts of draft regulations.

Blakeslee said the state and regional boards operate in an information vacuum because their members are prohibited from communicating with affected stakeholders while permits and policies are developed.

The bill would allow stakeholders to share their insights, expertise and concerns with board members before policies and permits are adopted, Blakeslee said.

Panel members included Richard Quandt, Erik P. Justesen, Tom O'Malley and Tim Walters.

Quandt is president and general counsel of the Grower-Shipper Association of Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties.

Justesen is a licensed landscape architect and the president and chief executive officer of RRM Design Group.

O'Malley and his wife, Peggy, own and operate Portola Inn in Atascadero.

Walters is a principal partner and leader of RRM Design Group's Civil Engineering Division.