



Voters reject water assessment

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor/mhodgson@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Friday, May 11, 2012 12:15 am

Nipomo Mesa property owners narrowly defeated a proposed assessment district to fund a pipeline that would deliver supplemental water from Santa Maria.

Ballot counting that ran more than four hours longer than anticipated showed 49 percent favored the assessment district while 51 percent opposed.

At least 50 percent had to favor the district for it to be formed.

Votes were weighted by the value of the assessments that would be assigned to parcels within the proposed district.

Dollarwise, the final tally was just over \$6.9 million in favor and just under \$7.5 million opposed.

Michael LeBrun, general manager of Nipomo Community Services District, said all the board members were disappointed by the results announced in a special meeting late Thursday afternoon.

"There were some tears in the room for those who had invested so much and know what this means for our community," he added.

LeBrun said the board plans to take some time to understand the message from the property owners "and not head off with some kind of knee-jerk reaction."

Board members directed the staff to bring back options for providing supplemental water at the next meeting set for 9 a.m. Wednesday, May 23.

But Pat Eby, a member of the Mesa Community Alliance that opposed the pipeline project and who observed the ballot counting, believes the message is simply that property owners don't want the pipeline.

"I feel the community, the residents of the Mesa, have spoken," she said. "There was very widespread discontent for the pipeline project."

Eby said the Mesa Community Alliance plans to move forward with new ideas and plans for providing a second source of water for the Nipomo area.

She said the easiest, cheapest and quickest way would be to use the 3,000 acre-feet of treated wastewater dumped into the ocean annually by the South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District.

The water could be piped to the Nipomo Mesa and treated to a tertiary level for use as irrigation water.

If pumped into the ground to percolate down and recharge the groundwater basin, it would provide more than 2,000 acre-feet of water a year, Eby said.

"It wouldn't take much to do that," she said. "I think that's the first measure. Then we move forward on a desal plant. I think a small desal plant is the answer."

LeBrun said the district is willing to look at alternatives.

"We stand steadfast to support any group that brings forth a solution for providing an additional water source," LeBrun said.

But he also said the district is skeptical of the alternatives.

"There was organized opposition that has thrown out a number of ideas, but we really didn't think any of them had legs," he said.

LeBrun added that the pipeline project is about 98-percent designed, and the district likely will complete the design process.

NCSD had proposed constructing a pipeline that would initially supply 2,500 acre-feet of water purchased from Santa Maria.

An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or the amount of water generally considered necessary to supply the annual needs of four to 10 people in an urban environment.

Construction costs were estimated at \$25.2 million. Of that amount, \$2.3 million would have been paid using a state grant.

The balance would have been covered by issuing bonds, which would be repaid with assessments on properties within the service areas of the Mesa's four major water purveyors.