

LODE WATER DISTRICT BEHIND ON REPAIRS

By **Dana M. Nichols**

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SAN ANDREAS - The Calaveras County Water District has fallen almost \$6 million behind on its maintenance of pipes, pumps, valves and other equipment, and district officials are studying whether to raise rates.

If all goes as scheduled, water and sewer customers could see higher bills in July, district General Manager Mitchell Dion said.

District staff reported on the district's maintenance backlog and other financial issues during a meeting Dec. 12.

Although the district's budget of about \$14.6 million for the 2012-13 fiscal year is balanced, that balance was achieved by making about \$654,000 in cuts, including leaving eight positions vacant.

One of those vacant positions, a district engineer, is normally considered crucial for a utility as large as the CCWD.

And then there's the postponed maintenance, including overdue overhauls for 33 lift stations. At \$40,000 each, those overhauls would cost \$1.32 million if the utility did them all this fiscal year.

Dion said utilities look at their equipment maintenance much as would a budget-conscious car owner.

"We all know sometimes we skip an oil change because although we've driven 5,000 miles, it was pretty easy driving," Dion said.

Still, the risk of going without the oil change - or a lift station overhaul - can increase with time, or based on other factors.

Dion said a lift station that is close to a stream or river, for example, is especially risky. If it fails, then untreated sewage could get into a waterway.

If that happens, the district could be forced by state water pollution cops to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines. Those enforcers, in turn, are trying to protect the drinking water of places downstream, such as Stockton.

Stockton gets drinking water from the Calaveras River and, sometimes, the Stanislaus River. The CCWD has sewage treatment facilities near those river systems.

A bit more than half of the CCWD's revenue comes from water ratepayers, and just over a quarter is from sewage ratepayers. The district also gets a little revenue from generating electricity and from property taxes.

Property tax income has been declining in recent years because of the long slump in real estate values.

Fortunately, Dion said, the district doesn't have to catch up on the entire maintenance backlog in a single year. Paying for that would require a steep rate increase - 50 percent or more.

Instead, Dion said, district officials will study how much maintenance they must do to save ratepayers the most in the long run.

Residential water customers who use up to 3,740 gallons a month pay \$39.50 monthly. Sewage utility customers pay \$37.50 a month.

The CCWD serves customers in communities across Calaveras County including Copperopolis, portions of Valley Springs, West Point, Arnold and Vallecito.

Before any rate increase can go into effect, the district's board of directors will hold several public meetings on the matter. The board is tentatively scheduled to confirm the rate increase it believes is necessary in March. Then, in May, there would be a public hearing before the board adopts any increase.

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