

County board approves raising sewer user fees

July 13, 2023



In a special meeting Wednesday July 5th, county supervisors authorized an increase in sewer user fees attached to the individual property owner's tax bill. The vote was 3-1, with 3rd District supervisor Chris Howard absent on county business in Japan.

Supervisors Joey Borges, Chairman Darrin Short and Valerie Starkey voted to raise the fees. Supervisor Dean Wilson voted NO, citing his reason that property owners may not have been properly noticed and reported constituents' confusion on the actual monthly fees for sewer usage would increase. The proposed sewer use fees are directed to maintenance only of aging, obsolete equipment not to monthly sewer/water bills.

Wilson stated, "It is irresponsible for the county to ignore pending equipment failures," and said his objection was simply one of property owner notification. He urged his colleagues to send out a new 45-day notice.

Those attending this special meeting protested the sewer usage maintenance increase, citing Proposition 218, the "Right to Vote on Taxes Act." The California Constitution protects tax payers by limiting methods by which local governments can create or increase taxes, fees and charges without taxpayer consent. A majority of the property owners in service area 1 which includes the Berstch tract and the area just north of city limits were required to have filed written protests prior to addressing the board.

2,210 letters involving 3,348 sewer connection letters were sent out in timely manner before Wednesday's public hearing. Including a dozen on-site protesters at The Flynn Center and an additional 180 unvetted protests sent to county clerk Alissia Northrup, the total opposition protests did not near approach the halfway

point (plus 1 vote) of the two thousand plus property owners who had a say on rejecting the sewer usage fees. The mood expressed by those who protested the increase on affected property owners was one of overwhelm and over-burden taxation. The board action follows a 12.2 percent increase (sales tax increase from 7.25 to 8.25 percent) two years ago with the voter-passed Measure R.

Economist Zachary Van Dinther of Robert D. Niehaus consultants addressed the board with a detailed report on the immediate need to fix aging sewer infrastructure within the service area jurisdiction. Van Dinther cited rising capital costs, capital needs, regulatory concerns, emergency reserves and the four decade hiatus since the last rate study.

Currently, property owners pay between a \$72-\$78 assessment on sewer infrastructure maintenance. The assessment will rise, accordingly:

\$108 (\$36 increase) in 2024,

\$135 (\$27 increase in 2025),

\$155.25 (increase of \$20.25) in 2026,

\$166.12 (increase of \$10.87) in 2027,

\$176.08 (increase of \$9.97) in 2028.

Economist Van Dither displayed a bar graph showing projected expenses usurping anticipated revenue commencing in 2024 and continuing indefinitely. The new assessment will bolster infrastructure reserves exceeding \$500,000 after 2028.

The newly-implemented assessment will effectuate July 1.