

Water merger governance discussed at workshop



Posted: June 7, 2016 11:34 a.m.

Updated: June 7, 2016 11:34 a.m.



About two dozen people interested in the proposed merger of two Santa Clarita Valley water agencies got a chance Monday night to see what an expanded board of directors would look like under such a merger — huge. About two dozen people interested in the proposed merger of two Santa Clarita Valley water agencies got a chance Monday night to see what an expanded board of directors would look like under such a merger — huge.

Unlike the 100 people who turned out for the first public workshop of the proposed merger of the Castaic Lake Water Agency and the Newhall County Water District in February, or like the 100 plus people who attended the heated session at City hall in April, the third workshop brought out 26 people.

What they saw when they walked into the board room at the Castaic Lake Water Agency Rio Vista Water Treatment Plant Monday night was 14 board members lining two walls, each with name tags and microphones. The members were a combination of some current Newhall County Water District and Castaic Lake Water Agency boards — all of those present in favor of the merger.

The number of board members was more than half the number of people who turned out to provide their opinions,

feedback and input.

Fittingly, the topic of Monday's discussion was "water governance concepts."

Douglas Johnson, president of the National Demographics Corporation, gave a graphic presentation called, "Castaic Lake Water Agency and Newhall County Water District Merger Solutions."

Johnson, hired jointly by CLWA and NCWD, presented two proposed maps of the Santa Clarita Valley, each representing three divisions. Each division represented roughly the same number of ratepayers: Division 1, representing 88,440; Division 2, with 88,550 and Division 3, 88,772,

Two of the divisions would be represented by five board members each, and the third represented by four.

Most board members surveyed candidly said they preferred a board whittled down over time to consist of either nine or 12 board members.

CLWA board member Bill Cooper told attendees that when a merger was first suggested there was a "lot of distrust, on both sides."

He told them: "Over time, we started to understand each other and started to build trust."

Cooper compared the proposed merger to the merger of Santa Clarita Valley neighborhoods such as Canyon Country, Saugus, Newhall and Valencia.

A handful of people took advantage of their chance to use three minutes at the microphone to express how they felt about the merger.

"Bigger isn't better," said Ed Dunn, who has served on the boards of both the NCWD and the CLWA.

"I've been reading documents from federal government and the state government and they have a preference for wanting small districts. That's why there's so many school districts because the public has better control.

"The 11 directors the CLWA has now came about through trickery. It started out with seven. It was nice to appoint one from each of the water purveyors and that brought it to 11.

"Then you started purchasing the purveyors but you don't drop the position," Dunn said. "No private individual could ever try to get on your board."

Alan Cameron expressed a preference for multiple boards and broader representation, saying: "I understand the justification, for instance, of having seven school districts.

"When I see the way they really work - yes, they have seven buildings and they have seven boards and seven principals, but there is a reason that benefits the kids and the parents and that is that they control what happens in their immediate neighborhood."

Roy Thun told the board he was confident that whatever governance comes about, he was confident he would still see a safe delivery of clean water.

What he wanted, he said, was transparency.

“When it comes to issues of governance, these are things I, as a customer, just want to get understood, At Valencia Water Company, they don’t disclose financial information which leaves the customer asking ‘What is going on here?’

“There needs to be that sense of transparency,” he said.

Cooper told Thun that he was “absolutely right.”

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