

New water district: What's in it for you?

Four of the five elected members of the Newhall County Water District Board of Directors are exploring constructive new ways to benefit our customers.

This includes a bold idea to create a new, modern and public water district using the best elements of Newhall County Water District and our neighboring water providers, including the Castaic Lake Water Agency.

Admittedly, this idea still needs substantial examination. We must continue to complete exhaustive financial studies before making any determination. But we believe this bold idea has merit and it's our duty to explore how it could benefit not only Newhall district customers, but the entire Santa Clarita Valley.

It is a complex process with many moving parts. Not surprisingly, some have asked, "What's in it for NCWD customers?"

We believe there may be significant benefits. Here's why:

Our valley is served by a patchwork of five separate water providers, some of which go back nearly 100 years. This means five separate sets of budgets, operating and administrative personnel, general managers, lawyers, water infrastructure, vehicle fleets, pension systems, etc.

Serving a relatively small community, a district joined as one would find it easy to identify efficiencies by combining redundant services and equipment, we believe.

A modernized water agency making decisions together (instead of in separate board rooms) would:

- Improve our ability to stabilize rates

- Plan for much-needed regional projects (like recycled water)

- Offer more coordinated and even better service to customers.

The current model works, but not nearly as well as it could. It's too fragmented. Project integration and

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regional planning are not the focus.

As a result, important projects such as getting recycled water throughout the Santa Clarita Valley have seen huge delays.

We can do better.

Did you know because of rules and laws that are decades old, roughly 5,000 local residents are served and billed by one water district, but actually live in the territory of the neighboring district — and vote for its board?

Also, roughly 40 percent of residents in the Santa Clarita Valley do not have the ability to vote directly for their retail water representatives.

These archaic oddities can be frustrating for the public. We are exploring the possibility of a potential new water district that could offer fair, clear and representative governance to everyone in the Santa Clarita Valley.

In the past several years, numerous lawsuits have been filed between Newhall County Water District and Castaic Lake Water Agency. It's exhausting, but we took these actions to protect our customers.

Though we generally prevailed, we think a better solution is to have a seat at the table. Our directors and our customers would have a direct say in all water costs in the valley, not just retail rates.

More broadly, it would allow us to bring the best ideas of our district to the operations, rates and budgets of a new agency.

The truth is, Newhall water and Castaic Lake water have much more in common than we do in conflict. Exploring a new agency is about

focusing on these commonalities, rather than conflicts. We most certainly can do better.

These are the "big picture" goals for the entire Santa Clarita Valley. As Newhall County Water District board members, our top priority is making sure any potential new district has everyday benefits for our customers.

The work being done on your behalf includes making sure these benefits become part of this process moving forward:

- Stabilize rates and reduce costs for Newhall County Water District customers;

- Protect the district's near-absence of debt and ensure debt from other districts never impacts our customers;

- Secure new sources of water for district customers, including recycled water supplies;

- Move for the district and its customers in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.;

- Infuse the new organization with Newhall County Water District's way of doing business, to the benefit of all Santa Clarita Valley residents.

Because this concept has both big-picture and everyday benefits for Newhall County Water District customers, we feel it is worthy of exploring fully. After all, finding ways to benefit ratepayers is the job you elected us to do.

That's why at least four of five of the district's board members plan to continue this careful examination into the formation of a potential new water district.

Please visit www.YourSCVWater.com to learn more.

B.J. Atkins and Maria Gutzeit are the president and vice president, respectively, of Newhall County Water District. Gutzeit is also on the committee exploring a potential new water district.