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CLWA, Newhall County Meeting To Discuss Merger

Posted by: Perry Smith in Santa Clarita Latest News, Water December 13, 2016 - 12:58 pm 2 Comments 116 Views

The Castaic Lake Water Agency and the Newhall County Water District are meeting Tuesday night to discuss a merger combining the two agencies, officials said Tuesday.

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A poll released by the two water agencies cited support for the move, which follows the mergers of the CLWA — originally established to be the region's wholesaler for that most valuable State Water Project resource — with the Santa Clarita Water Co. and then more recently, the Valencia Water Co.

The reasoning for the support given by agency officials — who claim more than 70 percent of ratepayers support the move — was a cost savings created by the vertical integration. A CLWA report touted the potential for more than \$14 million in savings by combining resources.

"The economic analysis proved there are strong, tangible benefits of a new district. But we also need to know how our customers feel about potential changes," said Steve Cole, General Manager for Newhall County Water District. "The results of the opinion study confirm that the public is eager to pursue savings and efficiencies, even if it means changing how water is managed in the Valley."

The meeting Tuesday will be an opportunity for residents to weigh in on the new deal, which water officials hope will streamline operations and improve transparency, in addition to saving cost.

"Our current water districts work generally well. But we know we can do better," said Matt Stone, general manager for the CLWA. "The two Boards have considered the various comments and ideas gained from nearly a year of public presentations and workshops where they had an opportunity to hear ideas and concerns. The resulting proposal has been tailored to better address these concerns."

Santa Clarita Valley water agency officials have also developed several possible names for their new combined agency, including "Santa Clarita Valley Water District" and "Santa Clarita Valley Water Agency."

NCWD and CLWA have also been engaged in a public engagement process to ensure customers are aware of the potential changes. These efforts appear to have worked, as awareness of the proposal and potential for a new district has effectively doubled and support for the idea has increased as the proposal has been refined and developed since the initial baseline survey conducted in February 2016.

The water agencies' study was conducted by Probolsky Research — a national public policy opinion research company with offices in Irvine, Sacramento and Washington, D.C. It included a scientific sample of Santa Clarita Valley registered voters. The study has a 95 percent confidence rating and 5.8 percent margin of error. It included both mobile phones and landlines and was conducted in both English- and Spanish-speaking households.

Here are some of the other findings:

The study focused on specific policy proposals developed as part of a year long exploration process, including:

- 71 percent of Valley water customers support the creation of a new water district
- 80 percent of residents support the cost-savings of a new district
- 82 percent support a new district's regional focus rather than the current structure
- 60 percent of the region support their elected water leaders to form the new district

The study also informed participants of specific challenges and proposed solutions to gauge support and levels of comfort with the proposal.

- 72 percent of customers preferred the districts' gradual approach to implementation, even if it delayed full cost savings
- 72 percent preferred the newly proposed division-based governance structure, providing every voter with an equal voice and representation, even if it meant losing their current governance structure
- 64 percent preferred a firewall to protect from sharing old debts between the new district