

Debunking merger myths

By Bill Cooper, Bob DiPrimio, Maria Gutzeit and Dan Mortensen

For several months, Castaic Lake Water Agency and Newhall County Water District have been exploring combining services.

The goal is to provide good service more efficiently, improve governance and enhance regional collaboration. This could result in a new public water agency built using the best elements of the region's current water providers.

Exploring this concept has near unanimous support from the region's elected water leaders.

The idea of a merger also enjoys support from nearly two-thirds of water customers, according to a recent public opinion survey. Support for the merger's components, including elected representation for all customers and combining the best aspects of current water providers into a new valley-wide district, nears 80 percent.

Just one of the 15 board members involved in this process opposes simply exploring how a merger could benefit the public. This is her right and we welcome her opinions.

What we cannot accept is her continual spread of false information. This is wrong and counter to good governance.

So we owe it the public to debunk her most egregious myths, many of which appeared in a recent Signal opinion column.

Myth: A potential merger is a "takeover of Newhall County Water District."

Fact: This has no basis in reality. Both NCWD and CLWA are voluntarily exploring the potential of a merger.

Moreover, any merger would ensure NCWD's service area is well represented and an equal player at the table.

it would reduce costs and take pressure off rates.

Savings and efficiencies realized through economies of scale and more efficient operations would cut costs and help stabilize rates.

Myth: This has been done "behind closed doors."

Fact: This is simply false. To the contrary, this has been among the most robust public engagement processes in our region's history.

We continue to engage the entire valley through a comprehensive process to learn priorities, hear ideas and work to implement feedback. We are proud of this process and welcome all ideas to the table.

There are many potential benefits to a merger, including:

- Stabilized rates and reduced costs across the valley;
- Directly elected governance for all water customers (a first in the valley);
- Completion of vital projects, like recycled water, groundwater recharge and stormwater capture;
- Integrated — rather than fragmented — water management and resource planning;
- End to current legal disputes (and associated costs) between local water suppliers;
- Elimination of redundant services (and associated costs);
- Fewer layers of government (and associated inefficiency and costs).

A potential merger is about a better way to govern, manage and operate water in the Santa Clarita Valley. It should not be about one person's agenda.

It's not a takeover of one district nor is it about Newhall Ranch, no matter how many times these myths are perpetuated.

A merger would involve serious public policy matters that require serious and methodical

Myth: A merger would create a “monopoly.”

Fact: This is a red herring. All California water districts, including our local water providers, are natural monopolies.

Having two or three water providers serving the same area would require two or three separate systems at two or three times the cost.

It’s our duty to explore ways to reduce costs and create efficiencies.

Myth: A merger gives water to the Newhall Ranch development.

Fact: Again, this has no basis in reality. The region’s Urban Water Management Plan, which was approved by all regional water leaders, already identifies where the water for proposed developments — including Newhall Ranch — will come from.

A merger wouldn’t change one drop of this plan. Period.

Myth: Rates would increase.

Fact: A merger would not cause rate increases. In fact,

deliberation.

We’re tremendously proud of how our two districts are collaborating to determine if we can solve these issues and create something truly special for the region. We owe it to our customers to try, and we appreciate their involvement.

And while we respect all opinions, we cannot accept the willful spread of false information, especially by an elected water board member. This does not serve the public or process well.

For the facts, more information and updates, please visit www.YourSCVWater.com.

Bill Cooper and Bob DiPrimo are elected board members of Castaic Lake Water Agency. Maria Gutzeit and Dan Mortensen are elected board members of Newhall County Water District. The four directors compose a committee established by both agencies to explore ways to settle litigation, which resulted in merger discussions.