

Council Starts Process to Hike Water, Sewer Rates; Public Hearing Is Feb. 15

The honeymoon is over for Yountville's new Council. Last Tuesday a standing-room-only crowd witnessed a new mayor and two councillors take the oath of office. This Tuesday, during a special meeting attended by one person — a reporter — the Council unanimously voted to begin the public notification process that may well result in a \$14-plus per month increase in average residential water and sewer rates.

The new rates could be implemented in March.

The last water and sewer rate increase was in 2007, and the Town has been subsidizing water and sewer costs to all categories of its in-town customers for the last decade to the tune of \$2.9 million.

This is an average subsidy of \$290,000 per year or about \$31 a month for every water customer.

The new Council inherited this situation, which the previous Council addressed earlier this year by commissioning a rate study by Bartle-Wells Associates and appointing an ad hoc committee of Councillor Marjorie Mohler and former mayor Cindy Saucerman to analyze options to set the Town's water and wastewater services in a break-even mode over the next five years.

An increase in the cost of water purchased on a wholesale basis from State-owned Rector Reservoir is the major factor driving the water rate increase, said Town Manager Steve Rogers. Since 2007 water purchase costs have increased by 50 percent.

Forcing the sewer increase are stringent permit conditions which require the Town to make system enhancements, including expansion of the reclaimed water pipeline, installation of larger pump motors and implementation of new technology, Rogers added.

Mohler emphasized as the



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	Low	High
Wednesday 12/8	48	55
Thursday	48	59
Friday	54	61
Saturday	53	62
Sunday	52	62
Monday	54	59
Tuesday 12/14	53	57
Precipitation =	1.20	
Season Total =	9.80	
Last Year = 7.90	(this date)	

options started to emerge, "the overriding thing we wanted was for the rates to be fair and equitable."

Fair, she said, means that the rates reflect the actual costs of providing water and sewer services, and equitable means that the costs are properly allocated among all classes of customers — residential and commercial — to reflect the load each customer class places on the system.

"In general, I'm not for subsidies," said Councillor Richard Hall. "Unfortunately, the Town has done that for the last 10 years... This is not going to come easily, especially for people on a fixed income."

Councillor Marita Dorenbecher agreed. "I anticipate that this is going to cause quite a stir in the community," she said. She urged the staff and Council to be proactive in finding ways to mitigate expense and procuring grants to enable the Town to make wider use of gray water.

Vice Mayor Lewis Chilton emphasized how large the utility subsidy has become, noting as a comparison that the Town could eliminate its entire Parks and Recreation Department, and it still would not be able to make up the \$290,000 a year subsidy it is now footing.

He remarked that the Council took responsible steps to decrease future retirement liabilities for the Town, and that it would be irresponsible not to address this large utility liability now and to pass it on to future citizens.

Mayor John Dunbar said the Town's investment in a municipal well and its sale of the unused North Bay Aqueduct (NBA) water rights were sound decisions that make the current situation less difficult to resolve.

He termed raising rates "a bit of a bitter pill," but added, "this is a decision that we can no longer afford to put off."

A comprehensive notice of the proposed rate increase, explaining the results of the recent water study and how the proposed new rates were determined, will be mailed to all Town water and sewer customers by December 30.

The Council will hold a public hearing on the proposed increases on February 15.

If a majority of the customers protest the increase in writing prior to the close of that public hearing the increase cannot be adopted.

Otherwise the new rates will go into effect beginning with the bi-monthly billing cycle that starts March 1.