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Fight against Bay Point water rate hikes sees largest turnout yet

By Sean Maher
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 12/02/2011 06:30:43 AM PST

Updated: 12/02/2011 06:30:49 AM PST

More than 100 Bay Point residents gathered this week to fight the local water utility's latest effort to raise rates, in what one organizer said was the best turnout yet in an ongoing campaign to bring them down.

Golden State Water Co. in July asked the state Public Utilities Commission to approve rate increases of about 14 percent between 2013 and 2015 for all its customers. Tuesday's hearing was held by Richard Smith, an administrative law judge for the PUC who will be writing a recommendation in the case next year.

Smith sat poker-faced and attentive in a room at the Ambrose Community Center as dozens of speakers railed against the proposal.

Val Mojica, a resident working to rally his community against the increases and push for a decrease instead, said rates have already increased drastically in recent years and are among the highest in Contra Costa County.

Under the proposed increases, the average bill for a Bay Point resident would increase from \$60.91 to \$68.61 next year and \$70.81 in 2015.

"And now Golden State Water has the effrontery to ask for another increase," he said. "The entire nation is asking each of us to make sacrifices in these tough economic times. I ask you to make sure GSW is right there with us making their share of the sacrifices."

Resident Martrude Preston said she got her bill in October and "thought it was a typo."

She said her charge for water went from \$61.70 in

September to \$265.93 in

October. She relies on Social Security income and said her water bill is now higher than her rent.

"If I'm paying for gold, I'd like to be able to drink it," she said, to the applause and laughter of the crowd.

Customers also complained of pressure problems and said they have to buy bottled water, arguing that the capital improvements Golden State says it needs are not providing any better service or water quality.

Willie Mims, of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, said he believes Golden State is asking for the increase to offset not increased costs but court fines and reimbursements the utility will have to pay out as the result of a recent court decision.

County Supervisor Federal Glover, who represents Bay Point, also asked the commission to hold off on any increases until that decision has been ironed out. Numerous water customers have been overcharged, he said, and while the utility is still in the process of lowering rates to the appropriate, approved levels and reimbursing customers, no other tinkering should happen.

Several residents called on the county to use eminent domain to take over the utility and lower rates, arguing that public utilities have a better track record of accountability and more livable rates.

In an interview, Glover said that may be difficult.

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"Golden State, they own the system," he said. "And it's an old, antiquated system. We'd need someone to take it over, and there's nobody jumping up and down to say, 'We want to buy this.'"

John Garon, a regulatory affairs manager for Golden State Water, told the crowd the company's means of establishing rates is simple:

"Rates start by taking our expenses and then dividing by how much water we sell," he said. "This is not a way for us to make additional money."

He said the company is asking for about a 10 percent increase, or about \$600,000 more a year from Bay Point customers.

Smith said the decision should take about a year from the filing.

The commission is still accepting public comments, which may be sent by email to public.advisor@cpuc.ca.gov or by mail to the Public Advisor's Office, 505 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco, CA 94102.

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