

Douglas County scraps water consolidation plan

By Austin Fay

STATELINE – Two years of work by Douglas County staff and the water districts in the county seemed to go down the drain Thursday when the commissioners on a 4-1 vote decided to forego consolidating the eight water systems.

“The problem in my mind is we’re asking one set of non-users (of water) to subsidize another set of users.” Commissioner Greg Lynn said.



Commissioner Greg Lynn makes a point at the June 17 meeting.

Photo/Austin Fay

But all the work and time is not a waste.

Commissioners agreed to seek a modification of the consolidation and look into paying for another study to investigate the viability of the modification. The last consolidation feasibility study cost the county \$100,000.

However, Commissioner Doug Johnson, the dissenting vote,

asked, "If not now, how much longer do we wait? I don't see how we're going to succeed by kicking the can down the road."

Also being considered is splitting the consolidation based on geography. Users who live close to Lake Tahoe would be consolidated into one system and those who live in the valley another.

For almost two years of deliberations at eight commissioner meetings the board has been trying to find the best solution, while complying with new federal water treatment standards to reduce arsenic levels in the water, and contending with a decline in new development in the county.

Implementing a water system consolidation would have affected 3,537 residential units.

In some cases consolidation is pitting ratepayers against each other. Residents at the lake like their flat rate, which could go away. Residents in the valley don't want rates to go up in order to subsidize other water systems. Jobs Peak district gets the short end of the stick with 2-inch water lines because it would put them in a higher pay bracket.

About 50 citizens were at the meeting. Jack McQuirk, a Marla Bay resident and an economist by trade, said he was there to encourage "true economies of scale" and to keep the Douglas County commissioners in check.

"I think that the county commissioners and the county manager have not watched over what's gone on in the county," McQuirk said. "The water districts have not been run properly. They made a lot of money when they were independent and didn't put a lot of maintenance money back into the system."

Valerie Wharton of Minden was outraged by the proposal, but calmly read a letter she wrote to the commission. "I didn't ask for the county to install a meter on my property and neither did my fellow neighbors. To say this is crazy would be

an understatement.”

Residents of East Valley and West Valley would have bore most of the burden, as they are the most populated. Some said they are unfairly paying an average of \$25 more per month to subsidize other water systems in the county. West Valley residents would have seen a \$6 average monthly uptick in their water bill.

Support for consolidation tended to increase among the 1,097 residential customers at Lake Tahoe where rates for Cave Rock residents would rise from \$181 to \$303 a month without it. Under the proposal before commissioners on Thurs-day, District 4 and Western District 5 residents (those who live near Lake Tahoe) would have to pay for the installation of meters. Their average rates would be \$108 a month by 2014.

Customers of the largest water system operated by the county, East Valley, will find their base rate increased from \$20.60 a month to \$23.91 a month by July 1, 2013. Their monthly volume charge would more than double from \$1.41 per 1,000 gallons to \$3.44 for up to 8,000 gallons. All amounts are for a three-quarter-inch water line. East Valley residents using up to 24,000 gallons would see their use bill go from \$2.26 per 1,000 gallons to \$4.07 per 1,000 gallons in 2013.

West Valley water customers would see their base rate rise from \$15.85 to \$23.91 per month. Their volume charge per 1,000 gallons would triple from a \$1.10 for the first 8,000 gallons to \$3.44.

Rates in Douglas County will remain on their projected upward-sloping path until the County Commission finds a solution. By the time a decision is made, the commission might look different because commissioners Nancy McDermid and David Brady are up for re-election in November.