

Metered water users flood STPUD rate increase hearing

By Kathryn Reed

A four-hour meeting Thursday night about potential South Tahoe Public Utility District rate increases ended with metered water customers' voices being heard and no one opposing the likely 3 percent sewer rate increase.

The latter will definitely be on the May 19 agenda (meeting time 2pm) for a board vote. It would increase the average customer's rate by less than \$1 a month starting July 1.



Nearly 40 people turned out May 5 for the public hearing about STPUD's proposed rate increases.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

The water meter rate, though, is a bit more convoluted process. Although staff will be meeting with the board's finance committee comprised of Chris Cefalu and Eric Schafer next week, it's likely a new proposal will not be crafted before the next meeting. (Agendas are posted on the district's

website which can be accessed by clicking on the ad to the right of this story.)

Part of the issue is the state is mandating water districts install meters by 2025. And the customers with meters as of 2011 must be charged based on consumption, per state mandates.

Until now South Tahoe Public Utility District residential customers have all been billed a flat rate. The 3,000-plus customers with meters are about to have a fluctuating bill based in part on the amount of water they use.

Most of the approximately 40 people at the meeting May 5 were there to talk about their metered rates. What many of them are concerned about is the summer irrigation season could cause their quarterly bill to hit four figures.

For people in the Angora burn area, where growing anything is exasperatingly difficult, they fear for what their next bill will be.

Tony Colombo, who lost his house in the 2007 fire, said he and his wife have spent nearly \$50,000 on landscaping because of the 50 percent attrition rate on plants. The soil, even though he has rototilled twice and added amendments, is not fostering plant growth.

He watches the high water table that wasn't there pre-fire, because conifers absorbed the moisture, send water oozing off his land and into the street, while at the same time he knows he'll soon need to turn the sprinklers on for the young vegetation.

Exasperation fills his voice as he addresses the five-member board.

The post-Angora Fire area is not the only place within STPUD's jurisdiction with a high water table.

Lake Tahoe News has approached STPUD, South Lake Tahoe and

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency officials with the idea that locations with high water tables ought to be looked at as areas to capture water that could be reused for irrigation. A city employee told *LTN* because water is not scarce here that is not likely to happen. And with rules in place that aren't friendly to using gray water, they say, what's the point?

Why metered water?

The impetus for the state legislation was based on the desire to decrease consumption. For most of the state, the country and the world water is a scarce resource. As much as it is renewable, it cannot be manufactured.

The theory is if people pay for what they use, they will use less – at least initially.

But for districts like STPUD that is easing into meters instead of installing them all at once, it means varied rates for customers. California mandates the district not charge more than it needs to operate.

Although that figure is not a moving target, changing the rate structure to get to the needed operating dollar amount makes rates a moving target for metered customers. It's balancing fixed costs against consumption.

About 87 percent of what South Tahoe PUD charges water customers is based on fixed costs, while the remaining 13 percent is consumption.

Looking at options

Consultant Shawn Koorn of HDR Engineering Inc. is tasked with revisiting his numbers that led him to come up with the metered rate plan.

What people in the audience spoke to was a desire to have a higher fixed rate and lower consumption rate. This would allow them have a more predictable bill and to ease into this whole

metered rate plan.

"We have to let our landscaping go or it will cost us \$1,000 (in water)," Linda Thompson told the board.

She was articulate and forceful in her frustration with the proposed rates.

Harold Singer, speaking as a citizen and one who lost his home in the 2007 fire, said with the district close to meeting its 2015 consumption goals as of today, why not restructure the rate for metered customers to make it a more gradual transition.

Plus, he said, "You may have more stable revenue if you have a higher fixed rate."

Singer also suggested the district educate people to read their meters so they don't face sticker shock when the bill arrives.