

Local news

Farmers say pipeline plan too costly

By **BOB LINNEMAN**
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WATSONVILLE — More than 100 people, many of them farmers, turned out Tuesday night to voice their concern over a proposed \$134 million water supply project.

The major concern expressed about the project, which includes building a pipeline to import water into the valley to offset an overdraft problem and resulting saltwater intrusion, is that farmers can't afford it.

Farmers say it could ultimately lead to many going out of business. The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency says it is working to build the pipeline to ensure water for the future. However, the farmers say they don't see much of a future if water fees increase to the levels the agency says it needs to construct the pipeline.

"If we can't afford it, the board needs

to start thinking about what we can afford," said raspberry farmer Will Garrouette. "They need to find out what the growers can afford without driving people out of business. We need water, but how do we do it cheap enough so you don't drive us out?"

The debate was heated at times as several speakers addressed the gathering — which included farmers, representatives from the water agency and outside experts. There was talk of lawsuits and trying to get the issue to a vote of the people.

Ray AmRhein, an attorney who worked on the original ordinance for the water agency, said the way the agency is charging augmentation fees may be illegal. It certainly is not in the spirit of the original legislation, he said.

"In my opinion it is illegal for the Board of Directors to be collecting augmentation fees," he said of the fees, which are levied against water users to

replenish the supply. "There is no project. No replenishment water is delivered."

AmRhein said the fees are more of a tax and are subject to voter approval. "You don't have a project, there is no way to deliver water to the valley. That's why I believe it is illegal," he said.

Farmers are currently being charged \$55 per acre foot of water. The state-mandated limit the agency can charge is \$90. However, if the agency gets its way, farmers could end up paying over \$200 an acre foot to fund the project. That's too much, they say.

Farmers account for 76 percent of the water used in the valley — meaning they would be on the hook for the bulk of the pipeline funding. "I think they can bankrupt many small business," said Hank Shimpler, owner of Spring Hills Golf Course, a major water user in the valley.

Shimpler has refused to pay any augmentation fees, protesting the board's decision to move forward with the pipeline project. "This just floors me," he said of the \$134 million price tag on the project.

Many in the audience want the water agency to find local solutions to the overdraft problem. Suggestions ranged from more storage for rainwater to a desalinization plant. It was also suggested that instead of the Pajaro Valley agency working alone on the project that other areas from Scotts Valley to Monterey be included — spreading out the cost.

PVWMA General Manager David McCabe said he left the meeting with plenty to think about. "I learned there is a lot of legitimate concerns out there that we have to strive to address," he said. "I came here to listen and I have a lot to absorb."