

Water board doubles Midcounty hookup fee

By BOB SMITH

Overriding protests from builders, the real estate industry and others, the Soquel Creek County Water District board of directors Monday doubled the price of water connection permits for new homes.

The district's connection charge — "storage and transmission fees" — will increase to \$3,790 Aug. 4 for the typical single-family home or apartment.

The district now charges \$1,770 for a single home's storage and transmission fee, plus a water meter charge.

The action puts the burden on new home buyers to finance the \$8.9 million cost of a diversion dam and water treatment plant on Soquel Creek in Soquel.

The alternative for the district would be to call an election seeking approval of revenue bonds, a step that could require doubling the existing water rates.

Board members overrode arguments from audience members that they should either look for another way to finance the project, or abandon the scheme altogether in favor of moving its wells further inland.

The vote to approve, first, a negative environmental impact declaration, and second, the storage and transmission fee increase, was unanimous.

Realtor Don Burklo and the Santa Cruz Board of Realtors sent letters to the district protesting the fee increase. Aptos home builder Chuck Holcomb argued that it was inequitable for the district to put the entire burden for paying for the diversion dam cost on the 2,100 new homes expected to be built in the water district in the next five years.

And district critic Lawrence Frommhagen said the district should abandon its surface water diversion plans altogether, and consider his plan to move its water wells into the Santa Cruz mountains where some people believe water is more readily available without the risk of seawater intrusion.

Frommhagen said he doesn't believe wintertime diversion from the creek will solve the "overdraft" problem the district now faces in its Capitola area coastal wells.

The Soquel Valley resident

accused the board members of imposing the recently-ordered water connection moratorium "to gain access to surface water on Soquel Creek.

"The cost," said Frommhagen, "would have met considerable opposition from the residents otherwise."

Frommhagen promised a stiff fight against approval of the EIR for construction of the diversion dam and "certainly the Glenwood Dam.

"Glenwood would be a huge environmental blight," he added, saying the Zayante Dam proposed by the city of Santa Cruz might be necessary, but not Glenwood. (Frommhagen lives a short distance downstream on Old San Jose Road from the proposed Glenwood site.)

Board president Ken Izant said the water district has abandoned hopes of sharing the water from the Zayante reservoir and believes it has to develop its own surface supplies.

Dean Kramer, president of the La Selva Beach Improvement Association, said the association supports the higher connection charge on new residences.

Holcomb, however, said that "to put the expense on new buildings is a bit unfair.

"To continue to escalate the cost of new homes is unfair," he added. "When I started building new houses here 10 years ago, a water connection cost \$200. Building costs were \$25 a square foot. Now they are \$50. "But the connection fees have gone up nearly 1,000 percent and you are talking about doubling them.

"Maybe you should impose a sliding scale — charge \$4,000 for a \$1 million house, \$3,000 for a \$500,000 house, \$2,000 for a \$250,000 house, and \$1,000 for a \$100,000 home."

He also suggested the district give free water connection permits for the low income housing the county is requiring the building industry to construct.

He also complained that the district's proposed fee of "\$3,800 (actually \$3,790) "makes you the highest water district I could find."

He said Central Santa Cruz County Water District now charges \$3,200; San Lorenzo Valley, \$3,000; Santa Cruz City, \$1,124; Watsonville, \$500; Marina, \$424; and Monterey, \$200.