

# City suspicious of water agency

## Concern voiced by council members

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Fears that the agency formed to protect the water resources of the Pajaro Valley may grow into a bureaucratic monster surfaced at the Watsonville City Council meeting this week.

Efforts by the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency to adjust the fees it charges Watsonville residents triggered some negative reaction from council members.

Under the new fee structure — which must be approved by the state Legislature — most Watsonville residents would pay \$10 in annual fees, \$5 more than at present. State Sen. Henry Mello has sponsored legislation that would allow the agency to collect the new fees.

Council members expressed concern that the agency might be a bureaucracy waiting to bloom. They asked that agency General Manager Craig French attend next Tuesday's council meeting to explain the reasons for the higher fees.

"They're building a bureaucracy, Betty," Councilman Vido Deretich told Mayor Betty Murphy. "And next year it's going to be \$15 and then \$20 and there's no end to this; they're building an empire."

Councilman Rex Clark agreed, saying, "At some point down the road, they'd like to take over our water system and I'm not going to let them do it."

Clark said yesterday he did not mean to imply there's a conspiracy afoot, but that he's seen the way bureaucracies operate.

"I have watched bureaucracies grow over the years too," he said. "And I think it might be time now to take a look at the agency we all helped create."

French said yesterday it appears the council may have

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misinterpreted the purpose of the new fee structure.

Although the agency would collect about \$30,000 more in fees from the area under its jurisdiction — which stretches from La Selva Beach to Moss Landing and from the ocean to the summit — the aim is "not to get more money," he said. "It's to make (the fee structure) more fair."

French pointed out that the "bureaucracy" consists of himself and a secretary. The agency's objectives are written in law and it has no intention of taking over any of the more than 60 water districts in its jurisdiction, he said.

"All we're doing is managing a resource for the benefit of all of them," he said.

But council members said the new structure means Watson-

ville would pay more than its share of management fees in proportion to the amount of water it uses.

The city uses about 10 percent of the total in the area covered by the agency, while money collected within the city would amount to more than 30 percent of the total.

French said that's because "the way we collect money is by charging against parcels in the valley and the greatest concentration of parcels is in the city."

Fees are now charged according to acreage alone, he said, and the fee change is a response to "years of complaints we've had from people who are paying a disproportionate share."

Parcels of less than an acre are charged \$5 annually, with the amount increasing by increments for larger parcels.

That means that people with larger parcels can pay up to \$3,000 for water-management services when they use no water and have no wells on the property, while an industrial water-consumer on less than an acre of land pays only \$5, French said.

The new structure allows for a basic \$10 charge and an additional incremental charge for parcels of more than an acre. Commercial, industrial and agricultural businesses would also pay another fee of up to \$20 based on intensity of land use, French said. Residential parcels would be exempt from that charge.

Said French, "The bottom line is, we're just trying to spread the fees more equitably."

Deretich and Clark said they just want to make sure the fee schedule is "fair and equitable" to city property owners, and that more restructuring might be in order.

"In my mind, at least," Clark said, "if they are going to juggle the fee schedule, then they need to do a little more study on that aspect."