

# Water costs rise in pandemic

District rate hikes ~~possible soon~~ discussed

May 07, 2020

By Ian Bradley

ianbradley@theacorn.com



The coronavirus pandemic has shut down many parts of life, but there are some things that can't be put on hold, like the payment of utilities.

~~Both~~ Las Virgenes Municipal Water District was informed of a pending rate hike by Southern California wholesale water giant Metropolitan Water District, and increase that might have to be passed along to local customers. LVMWD partner agency ~~and~~ Triunfo Water and Sanitation District previously announced plans to increase its water rates starting this summer. ~~have tentative plans to increase their rates by the end of the year. The rate hikes would cover an increase in the cost of wholesale water from the Metropolitan Water District, which provides local supplies.~~

Metropolitan's board of directors approved a 3% rate increase effective Jan. 1, 2021, and a 4% increase effective Jan. 1, 2022.

"It's operational needs—inflation, increased costs for parts— we're going to have to determine as an organization how we want to handle this under the current circumstances," said Mike McNutt, Las Virgenes district spokesperson.

McNutt said LVMWD could delay passing on the increased costs to customers in light of financial hardships imposed by the virus lockdown, but that the area's water users will ultimately have to pay.

"The more you kick the can down the road, the more you're going to have to increase the rates (later)," McNutt said.

Metropolitan's board considered delaying the increase from January to July of 2021 due to the economic hardship faced by customers. Las Virgenes recommended the increase be delayed, but their suggestion was rejected. The Met hike was announced even as local residents face their highest unemployment on record because of the lockdown.

"As for LVMWD passing the rate increase along, it is too early to make such a decision and discussion with our board would be required," LVMWD general manager Dave Pedersen said.

The Las Virgenes Municipal Water District provides water and sewer services to 75,000 residents in Agoura Hills, Calabasas, Hidden Hills and Westlake Village, as well as unincorporated areas of western Los Angeles County.

The Triunfo Water and Sanitation District, an LVMWD joint partner, distributes water to homes in Oak Park and portions of Thousand Oaks. The district is partnering with LVMWD on a new water purification plant in Agoura Hills that will treat wastewater and make it drinkable.

James Wall, the Triunfo board of directors chair, said his district will implement three separate rate hikes, none of which pertain to the Metropolitan rate increase.

Triunfo will increase fees for wastewater, potable water and recycled water.

Wall said the potable (5%) and recycled water (2%) increases will go into effect this July, and a wastewater increase (15%) will appear on customers' bills in October.

The adjustments are part of a five-year rate restructuring plan adopted in 2015.

The Triunfo wastewater increase will help finance the \$120-million Pure Water Project, the Agoura Hills plant that will help local agencies decrease their reliance on water imported from northern California.

The Pure Water Project has been in the works for several years and is expected to be built by 2030. The plant is being constructed in response to higher clean water standards imposed on the Tapia sewer plant in Calabasas and the effluent it discharges into the Malibu Creek watershed.

"The Environmental Protection Agency and the state water board require that we have to do something with the water that we discharge into the Malibu Creek watershed," Wall said. "In order to meet that requirement we would either have to build facilities at Tapia at the cost of over \$100 million in order to discharge it, or we can take that water, which we're currently selling as recycled water, and purify it (for drinking water)."

Wall said he understands that the higher water rates coming on the heels of the pandemic will upset many customers who are already in financial straits.

“This is certainly not something we look forward to doing, but the costs for the district don’t change because of the pandemic. If we delayed this, it would result in the rate payers having to pay more,” Wall said. “This is certainly not something we want to do but it’s something we have to do. We don’t have any choice.”

Both LVMWD and the Triunfo district have announced they will not shut off customers’ water for nonpayment of bills during the pandemic. That doesn’t mean customers don’t have to pay at all. The money is still due once the economy bounces back, but in order to help residents who may have lost their jobs during the shutdown, both districts are allowing a temporary nonpayment of bill.

*Follow Ian Bradley on Twitter @Ian\_reports.*