

Posted on Sat, Jan. 21, 2006

Proposal aims to limit water use

City, district try to reconcile differing Fort Ord estimates

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Residents of thousands of planned homes in three major Marina developments on Fort Ord could face huge water-bill surcharges if they use too much water.

That's the intent of a proposal floated by Marina officials to the Marina Coast Water District in hopes of dampening friction between the two over estimates of water use by the big Fort Ord projects.

The city and water district, which provides water service to the city and its Fort Ord area, differed on water-use estimates over two projects already approved by the city -- the 1,050-home Marina Heights residential project and the 1,237-home residential and commercial University Village project.

The city estimated that the projects would use a combined 248 acre-feet less of water than what the water district estimated. Now the possibility of different water-use projections could spell trouble for Cypress Knolls, a 712-unit senior housing project the city hopes to approve in June.

"If there is no water for them to take to the bank, it's going to get held up," City Councilman Dave McCall said this week.

The amount of water available for Fort Ord redevelopment projects is capped at 6,600 acre-feet by the Fort Ord Reuse Authority. Marina's share is 1,325 acre-feet.

Though city officials are confident Cypress Knolls could go forward without exceeding the city's Fort Ord water allocation, they are concerned the water district again will come up with a higher water-use estimate.

"(The project) could be put in a difficult situation, though the city has the power to provide the allocation," said Doug Yount, city development services director. "We would prefer not having that discrepancy."

To smooth the waters, the city has proposed adopting a strict water-conservation law that would penalize residents in the three developments with surcharges of 200 percent to 800 percent for going over "water budgets" intended to adhere to the city water allocations. Project developers support the proposal.

Members of a city-water district subcommittee met this week to go over particulars of the proposal, which will go to the water district board Wednesday for its conceptual approval. If the water district board agrees, Yount said, it would take four to six months to work out details of a city ordinance.

In exchange, the city wants the water district to accept its projections for water use at the three Fort Ord projects.

"We would like the district to recognize the science and effort and engineering that have gone into the city

figures," Yount said Friday.

Another benefit would be "a level of comfort" if the city and water district "are moving along on the same page," he said.

At this week's meeting, David Brown, chairman of the water district board, said his five board members are divided about the city proposal. "It's certainly better than nothing," he said.

Marina City Councilman Gary Wilmot urged support for the measure, saying it would be temporary until "artificial" water allocations imposed by the reuse authority are eventually lifted.

"I don't think the real water supply is ever going to be an issue," he said.

Yount said tiered-pricing systems have been successful in conserving water in other areas, including San Francisco and the Monterey Peninsula.

Yount said it's questionable whether residents of Marina's new Fort Ord developments would ever find their water use verging on the high penalty areas.

"If the goal is successful, we would never have to collect anything," he said.

University Village project director Simon Whitmey said, "We have to monitor our own ongoing water use."

The Marina developers also are negotiating with the Marina water district to lease the district's small desalination project.

The plant, built in the 1990s and capable of producing 300 acre-feet of water a year, isn't operating now, said Marc Lucca, interim water district manager.

Lucca said the developers approached the district with the lease request.

"It's just another way to access more water for their development, should it be needed," he said.

Also at Wednesday's meeting, the water board will discuss the possible lease in closed session, Lucca said. "Something might be coming to a head."

Approved projects that may be affected Marina Heights: 1,050-home development University Village: 1,237-home residential and commercial development MARINA

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