

# Councils Oppose Water Rate Hike

Five L.A. neighborhood panels have voted to fight a proposed 18% increase in fees. DWP officials say the hike is needed for upgrades.

By Patrick McGreevy  
Times Staff Writer

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Employing new political clout, five Los Angeles neighborhood councils have voted to oppose a planned 18% increase in water rates, while a dozen others are scheduled in the next few weeks to take up the matter.

The organized campaign of opposition represents the first time the city-sanctioned network of neighborhood councils created by voters in 1999 has weighed in on such a large scale on a proposed rate increase, said City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who was troubled by the opposition.

"I'm sitting here believing that you have made the case, but it's clear that for some reason it has not been made to neighborhoods," Hahn told DWP officials during a hearing Tuesday by the council's Commerce, Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Although two of the three committee members voiced tentative support for the increase, which is proposed to take place over two years, the panel postponed action Tuesday after hearing opposition and complaints from neighborhood leaders that their councils had not been given adequate and timely information from the city Department of Water and Power.

The councilwoman objected that the DWP board recommended the rate increase in December before any of the neighborhood councils were able to take a stand. "A board or commission is not supposed to make a decision until all neighborhood councils have been given enough time to weigh in on the matter,," Hahn said.

Gerald Gewe, chief operating officer of the water system, told the committee Tuesday that the DWP sent out e-mails, videotapes and information booklets to all of the neighborhood council leaders and invited them to five public briefings on the rate increase.

"We only had a moderate turnout. To me that suggests this is probably not the most pressing issue on people's minds," Gewe told the council panel. DWP officials say the rate increases are necessary to pay for improvements to the water system's security and water quality. Mayor James K. Hahn has backed the rate increases as necessary. The

mayor has also been a leading proponent of the neighborhood council system, so he could be put in a tough spot if a large number of the panels join the opposition in the coming weeks.

The increase has been opposed in votes by the Harbor-Gateway South, Tarzana, Porter Ranch, Sunland-Tujunga and Northridge West neighborhood councils. Northridge West is an interim board that is awaiting city certification.

In addition, the San Fernando Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, made up of representatives of all 35 Valley councils, has voted unanimously to oppose the rate increase.

Paul Robinson of the Harbor-Gateway South Neighborhood Council said he was troubled the rate increase is being sought even as the DWP water system is generating enough surplus revenue to transfer \$27 million this year to the city general fund.