

## **Water torture**

Rate hike is just another City Hall betrayal of Los Angeles' neighborhood

**Friday, June 10, 2005** - You would think Los Angeles city officials would know by now not to try to skirt the people when it comes to something as serious as a utility rate hike. Not after what happened last year.

That was when Department of Water and Power officials tried to slam through an 18 percent, two-year rate hike without giving the new advisory neighborhood councils a chance to even discuss the proposal, or even demonstrating that the money was needed or what it would actually be spent on.

Bad move. Flush with the realization that "advisory" doesn't mean "powerless," community activists excoriated the department, and shamed City Council members into approving only the first year hike of 11 percent.

It wasn't really much of a victory except for the council and the DWP's commitment that there would be no further rate hikes without having an independent financial analysis conducted of DWP operations. They also extracted a promise from DWP officials -- really, really this time -- to work with neighborhood councils next time.

Yet, there they were on Tuesday, DWP officials, showing that their historic contempt for the public and its interests hasn't changed at all. They were ready to push ahead with a 4.3 percent water rate hike this financial year and a plan to squeeze 15 percent more over the following four years.

Was there a report detailing the DWP's finances and spending plan?

Of course not.

Were neighborhood councils informed and given a chance to discuss the increase?

Of course not.

The DWP's new chief, Ron Deaton, should know better than that. He was the chief legislative analyst for the City Council at the time of the first water rate hike controversy. Long the council's master who put the interests of the city's bloated bureaucracy and fat-cat politicians ahead of the public interest, Deaton showed in this episode that he still hasn't learned that the roots of democracy are growing in Los Angeles, and the people are taking over.

The fraud of the rate hikes is that the City Council and mayor have for years colluded to rip tens of millions of dollars in ratepayer money out of the DWP to give to their friends and acquaintances inside and outside City Hall. If they would stop stealing that money, the DWP would have all the cash it needs to meet federal water quality standards.

This is a serious matter that goes to the heart of City Hall's corruption.

The public will learn a lot about its incoming mayor in watching how he handles it. And how he handles it will depend more than anything on whether the neighborhood councils and the communities they represent wake up and get organized to fight for a complete overhaul in the way the DWP and the rest of city government operates.