

Santa Rosa hikes water, sewer rates

By [MIKE McCOY](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Tuesday, December 8, 2009 at 3:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Tuesday, December 8, 2009 at 11:27 p.m.

A typical Santa Rosa homeowner will face paying a combined water and sewer bill of \$140 a month by 2011, thanks to double-digit increases in water and sewer rates approved Tuesday by the City Council.

The increases — 8 percent in water rates each of the next two years and 7 percent in sewer rates for both years — were approved unanimously despite a parade of 30 speakers who urged the council to postpone its vote.

“I look around Santa Rosa and I see pain,” said resident Stan Paule, alluding to dying lawns of people facing home foreclosures and other economic setbacks who already find it difficult pay what the city now charges for water and sewer services.

Council members, while mindful of the tough economic times, unanimously said they had no choice and some even doubted a reprieve from such high annual increases will be forthcoming in the next few years.

“It is sad. I know people are suffering financially,” Councilwoman Veronica Jacobi said.

Jacobi, citing global warming, and Councilwoman Jane Bender, noting increasing state and federal pressures regarding water supply and endangered fish, said they expect such increases to continue.

“We want to do what's right for the ratepayers, but we want to do what is right for the environment and the future,” said Bender, alluding to those increasingly stringent state and federal water and wastewater standards.

Tuesday's approved rate increases, the first of which become effective in mid-January, come after a decade that saw water rates jump 80 percent and sewer rates 76 percent since 2000.

The combined rate increases for an average Santa Rosa household are expected to raise their monthly sewer and water bills, which today stand at around \$122, to \$142 by 2011.

In Sonoma County's next two largest cities, the combined bills based on the same amount of water use and sewage flows is \$106 in Petaluma and \$93 in Rohnert Park.

Utilities Director Miles Ferris said it was just two years ago, when the city raised sewer and water rates 18 percent over the two ensuing years, that “I was hopeful we were at the end of significant rate increases.”

Ferris, however, said that's become impossible in the face of the need to expand the city's wastewater reuse system, the rising cost to operate the Geysers wastewater-to-electricity system, more stringent water quality and wastewater regulations to protect endangered fish and the need to raise revenue to replace more than 250 miles of leaking and antiquated sewer and water lines.

In addition, blame for most of the first-year 8 percent increase in water rates was placed on the Sonoma County Water Agency, which was forced this past summer to cut its use of Russian River water by 25 percent to protect the fall salmon runs and the water supplies for Ukiah and other cities upstream of Warm Springs Dam.

The reduction, which resulted in the agency calling for widespread conservation by its water customers including Santa Rosa, its largest, proved highly successful but resulted in a dramatic drop in revenues to run the county's water delivery system.

To make up the operating deficit, the agency raised the rates it sells water to its customers by 20 percent in July, way beyond its usual annual 3 percent increase.

Those reasons, however, weren't enough to mollify the speakers who addressed the council during a four-hour public hearing on the rate increases Tuesday.

Allen Appell, who owns two small apartment complexes, estimated his annual water bill will jump to \$35,000 by 2011, a cost he said could force him to raise rents well beyond the \$800 to \$900 he now charges.

“You're killing off affordable housing with this increase,” he said.

J.K. Karrman called the dual increases “a big money-grabbing thing” and suggested one of the primary culprits is the county Water Agency.

“It's a crime to penalize people for what they've done,” she said, citing widespread conservation undertaken by the citizenry at the agency's request.

A few speakers, however, supported the increases including Steve Fuller-Rowell. “Water is too cheap here,” he said, suggesting that higher pricing would encourage greater conservation.

You can reach Staff Writer Mike McCoy at 521-5276 or mike.mccoy@pressdemocrat.com.