

Daily Pilot

Mesa Water opposes statewide drinking water tax

By Jim Atkinson

APR 12, 2018 | 2:15 PM



"Taxing Mesa Water customers for essential drinking water in order to fund other community water systems outside of our area is not sound policy from either fiscal or local control standpoints," writes the president of the Mesa Water Board. (File Photo)

Since Mesa Water District was founded as our local water agency in 1960, Mesa Water customers have received safe and reliable drinking water.

As a result of Mesa Water's strategic water resource planning, prudent financial policies and water system management and capital improvements, our community continues to benefit from having safe, resilient and sustainable water and water services.

This is not the case in other areas of the state where, unfortunately, some Californians in small, rural communities may not have the same reliable access to safe drinking water.

To address this situation, a California Senate Bill (SB 623), proposed by state Sen. Bill Monning (D-Carmel), seeks to put a tax on Mesa Water customer bills — and on all other public agency drinking water bills statewide — to fund the provision of drinking water in a limited number of other California communities.

Additionally, a budget trailer bill proposed by the Brown administration is also seeking this same tax on drinking water. While the concept of ensuring safe drinking water for all Californians is an admirable one, the Mesa Water board of directors has taken the position that the proposed legislation is not the appropriate funding method for addressing this issue.

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Simply put, taxing Mesa Water customers for essential drinking water in order to fund other community water systems outside of our area is not sound policy from either fiscal or local control standpoints.

The board believes that there is a better approach. A broad, statewide coalition of water providers, led by the Assn. of California Water Agencies (ACWA), is advocating for the state to take a fiscal leadership role in addressing this situation.

This coalition believes that a four-part funding package comprised of:

- 1) Ongoing federal safe drinking water "state revolving" funds;
- 2) voter-approved general obligation bonds;
- 3) proposed assessments related to nitrates in groundwater;
- 4) and a limited amount of general fund dollars — already collected by the state.

This package of funds is a far more practical way to make safe drinking water accessible for the communities at issue, without burdening Mesa Water customers with another tax — particularly a tax on a vital human resource.

Mesa Water recognizes the need to keep costs as low as possible for our customers, as illustrated by that fact that we are among the most efficient water districts in Orange County, based on annual expenditures per capita.

Mesa Water's ability to provide our customers with clean, reliable and safe drinking water depends on our local control and rate-making authority, which allows us to use the rates you pay to fund the local water infrastructure repairs and capital improvements to sustain our community's high-quality water service.

I encourage you to visit MesaWater.org/WaterTax to learn more about this important issue.

Costa Mesa resident JIM ATKINSON is president of the Mesa Water Board.

<http://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/opinion/tn-dpt-me-commentary-water-20180412-story.html>