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City backs water district's bid to provide electricity

by Bill Poindexter / Sun Post

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MANTECA — The South San Joaquin Irrigation District has gained the city's support in its bid to become the retail provider of electric service to Manteca and the surrounding area.

The Manteca City Council voted unanimously at its meeting Tuesday, Sept. 15, to support the SSJID in its quest. That's a change from 2005, when the council decided not to ride along when the district filed its first application with the San Joaquin Local Agency Formation Commission.

Why the change of heart? Councilman Vince Hernandez said the SSJID is putting its money into action as a benefit to the community, pointing to its addition of a solar plant, among other things.

"The timing is right," Hernandez said this week. "Every nickel and dime counts for those who are on a fixed income. A 15 percent savings is huge for them."

"We need to give them the opportunity to see what shakes out," Councilman Steve DeBrum said of the SSJID.

"We are disappointed that the Manteca City Council has chosen to take a position on an issue without having heard both sides of the story," PG&E spokeswoman Nicole Liebelt said. "The council has rushed to judgment on an issue that poses significant risks to the community."

The SSJID continues to pitch an across-the-board rate reduction of 15 percent. General Manager Jeff Shields told the council during his presentation that equates to a savings of \$349 per family per year and \$300,000 to the city on its core utility bill.

PG&E questioned those numbers. Emily Barnett, who handles government relations for the company, pointed out that PG&E has "on tape" that the SSJID's legal counsel "cannot guarantee that rate discount."

She said the "major flaws" in the SSJID's first application "still exist" in the new one.

"What's most concerning is that despite these rejections, they are literally filing the same application in 2009," she said.

The council had much to chew on and a packed council chambers watching.

Shields' presentation highlighted the SSJID's qualifications and history. He said the district was able to provide surplus water despite being in the third year of a drought. Shields said PG&E has "some 700 tariffs" with different rate structures, and the district plans to "reduce every one of those."

He also talked about jobs.

“This is about keeping jobs here in the community — local control and local accountability,” Shields said.

Many in attendance were PG&E employees, who stood on Barnett’s command to show how many live in Manteca. Their actions left few people sitting.

“If you want to see if this impacts your community, I’d love for you to look at these folks,” Barnett said. “These are Manteca residents that also work here. When we talk about local control, that’s the local control we’re looking at.”

The council kept an informal running tally of speakers for and against the proposal and asked several questions of both sides before voting to support the SSJID.

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