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Water conservation district defeats merger efforts

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10:00 PM PDT on Wednesday, July 15, 2009



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The Press-Enterprise

A Redlands water conservation district succeeded Wednesday in fighting off a takeover by a larger water agency, ending a three-year battle over control of local water resources.

The San Bernardino County Local Agency Formation Commission voted 4-3 to reject a merger of the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, based in Redlands, with the larger San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District.

Conservation district officials, who opposed the move, said the decision is a victory for East Valley residents.

"They will have an agency that will continue to exist that has no other agenda than to conserve our water," said John Longville, a district board member and former state assemblyman.

The conservation district, created in 1932, recharges aquifers in the Bunker Hill basin that supply groundwater to much of the region. The San Bernardino-based municipal district imports water from Northern California through the State Water Project and sells it to other water agencies. It also recharges aquifers from Fontana to Yucaipa.



LAFCO staff had argued that the two water districts perform duplicative tasks and it would be more efficient to combine them.

"The purpose of both agencies is to maximize local water resources in the best way possible," said Kathleen Rollings-McDonald, LAFCO executive officer.

The agency, which oversees boundary changes, began the process in 2006 when it took away the conservation district's spheres of influence -- a step that removes its ability to expand and usually a precursor to dissolving a district.

The water conservation district went to court to stop the merger, but in May a state appellate court rejected its contention that LAFCO didn't have the legal authority to force the consolidation. That cleared the way for it to be considered.

On Wednesday, some LAFCO directors expressed doubts that a combined agency would be more efficient. Some were concerned whether local water sources would get the same level of protection under a larger, regional agency.

Highland Councilman Larry McCallon said he sees the two water agencies as having separate roles -- the conservation district conserves water while the municipal district sells water.

"The losers are the taxpayers of San Bernardino County and the taxpayers of my city and the loss of local control," he said.

Opponents also feared that San Bernardino County residents would have to make up for the loss of groundwater recharge fees paid by other agencies that feed into the basin, including Riverside. The fee would have been eliminated by the merger because the municipal district doesn't have authority to collect it.

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