

Locals take a look at future of California water

Felicia Alvarez, Davis Enterprise, 8-3-15

Representatives from the California Water Commission came to Davis on Thursday night, opening their ears to the public as they forward their efforts to allocate some \$2.7 billion to transform the future of water storage in California.

This task comes in the form of the Water Storage Investment Program, just one part of the \$7.5 billion water bond passed by voters last fall through Proposition 1, the Water Quality, Supply and Infrastructure Improvement Act, co-authored by state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis.

The funding at hand will be allocated to support water storage and restoration projects across the state, with particular focus on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. In the past some larger projects have had a harder time finding funding; the water storage program will help large and smaller, regional projects alike, Wolk said.

“It’s about reducing our reliance on delta water, for local and regional self-sufficiency,” Wolk said. “Every drop of water needs to be used.”

More than 30 concerned residents of Davis and surrounding areas came to the hearing at the Veterans’ Memorial Center to learn more and to voice their own local water concerns to the commission. The meeting was one of three public outreach meetings, including Napa on July 27 and Bakersfield on Aug. 10.

“When most people think water storage, they think of reservoirs. ... We’re thinking about whole watersheds,” said Armando Quintero, one of the nine members of the commission. Hailing from San Rafael, Quintero has a career-long history in environmental education, holding positions with the U.S. National Park Service and UC Merced’s Sierra Nevada Research Institute.

The public forum was conducted by The Center for Collaborative Policy — a policy group that operates out of Sacramento State — alongside representatives from the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the State Water Control Board. Quintero was the only member of the California Water Commission present.

“Looking at regional areas, what resources do we have to create a resilient portfolio for water?” Quintero asked. After watching millions of gallons of water get processed through wastewater treatment plants and then discharged instead of captured, Quintero is ready for change.

Public benefit is at the forefront of all potential projects and includes ecosystem improvements, water quality improvements, flood control, emergency response and recreation.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife and the State Water Control Board’s priorities are also thrown into the mix.

The department set six ecological priorities that it hopes the program achieves, including:

- * Recovering endangered, threatened and at-risk native fish species;
- * Restoring flows regimes to improve native habits;
- * Enhancing recreational and commercial opportunities;

- * Reducing the negative impacts of non-native species;
- * Preventing impacts from in-river structures; and
- * Increasing the quantity and quality of riparian habitats.

Looking at water quality, the State Water Control Board wants to improve water temperature, dissolved oxygen, nutrient, mercury and salinity conditions as well as protect groundwater basins, tributary flows in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and reduce water demand in the delta.

To tap into that \$2.7 billion in funding, however, a project has to cover some, but not all, of those priorities, as well as meet all of the application criteria.

From there, the commission will decide what projects will receive money. Although there's no monetary cap for how much can be allocated to a single project, no more than 50 percent of a project's cost can, a ceiling set by Proposition 1.

"It seems like they need to do more development before we can see what local projects could benefit," said Ken Loy, a Davis resident who attended the meeting. Nonetheless, Loy said he enjoyed the opportunity to comment on the process.

Regulations and guidelines that make up the funding framework are still being drafted. The guidelines will be complete by December 15, 2016, after which programs can begin applying for funding. Throughout 2017, groups can submit applications to the commission, with a tentative deadline set in November 2017.

"Some of the larger projects are looking at a 5-plus-year time frame," said Jennifer Marr, a staff member from the California Water Commission.

With current pressures on the water supply, some were left wondering why the commission won't take action sooner, rather than later.

"We wanted to give the community time to design a fair, equitable program and reach out to the public," Marr replied.