

Water district's many woes leave some steamed

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SPECIAL TO THE UNION

The Rio Linda Water District is over its head in water fights with four high-level resignations as well as allegations of nepotism, mismanagement of funds, and inflated pensions and salaries.

On top of this, the board of directors in a special meeting tonight will discuss proposed rate in-

creases that would hike rates anywhere from \$3 to \$26 per month.

Opponents have voiced concern with last week's meeting when the board voted 4-1 to approve the preliminary '93-94 budget that included the yet-to-be-approved rate increase.

Board member Jerry Wickham dissented. "The preliminary budget was approved, but it's not preliminary as I see it," he said after the meeting. He said he considers it a final budget.

One board critic is Elverta resident Marsha Brown, who has been attending the district's meetings for the past 18 months. "I go down to these meetings every time and I bring up things (the board) doesn't like," she said.

"At the last meeting (July 14), at least 20 things were recommended to the board (concerning) ways to avoid a rate increase," Brown said. "They didn't respond."

Twelve-year resident Vic Shepherd, who became actively involved during last November's election, said, "Decisions are made even before the board meetings start."

Approving the budget were president Michael Brady and board members Mel Griffen, Richard Surratt and Earl Hovda, who had been appointed the night before.

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The preliminary budget included the projection that water sales for next year will be \$591,000, up \$80,000 from office manager Carol Lincoln's original budget proposed two weeks earlier.

One simmering controversy for the district has centered around general manager Mason Adams, who retired on May 26, 1992, after running the district for 21 years as general manager. Adams also served as a board member 10 years previously.

The board hired Adams' former bookkeeper, Carol Lincoln, to succeed him. Adams acknowledged Lincoln is a good friend of his daughter, but said she was qualified for the job. However, Lincoln's qualifications and employment have been questioned by director Wickham and other critics in Rio Linda.

In the fall of 1992, Adams ran for the board again and became the largest vote-getter, gaining 2,158 votes out of 12,540.

In June 1993, general manager for operations Mike Adams — who was appointed to his position by his father — and office manager Alice Eliot both resigned from their jobs with an annual salary of \$45,726 and \$37,400 per year, respectively.

Mike Adams has refused to be interviewed. Eliot is reportedly out of state.

John Weber, board member for 26 years, resigned in June and Mason Adams resigned in May.

Meanwhile, the board has agreed to wait six months before deciding whether to fill or terminate the two empty employee positions, and whether to combine duties and raise the salaries of the remaining positions.

The six salaried district employees and their earnings, according to the '92-'93 budget: general manager Carol Lincoln, \$56,280; field supervisor Tom Ray, \$40,889; mechanic Dan York, \$36,312; mechanic Bob Ames, \$32,715; secretary Dee Reed, \$27,600; and clerk-receptionist Liz Maxwell, \$10,725. Meter readers and summer help cost \$3,672.

The new budget combines the clerk/receptionist and bookkeeper positions, which increases Maxwell's salary to about \$20,000 per year.

Reed will assume some duties of office manager at a salary increase of \$1,380. Ray will also receive an increase of \$1,111.

A pension controversy has arisen over an April 1991 action, when Weber asked the board to consider a \$5,000 bonus as merit compensation for Mason Adams work. Adams later agreed to a 16.4 percent salary increase instead.

"I told them that I would accept a salary increase that was commensurate with other district managers," Adams said. "The PERS system has already au-

ditated my plan. PERS has agreed that I did not receive a bonus; that it was a salary increase."

But according to then board president Arlette Hodel, Adams was granted a salary "bonus." "(Adams) knew exactly what he was doing," Hodel said. "(The board) had every intention of giving him a \$5,000 bonus, but he manipulated the meeting by saying it was a salary increase."

Because the \$5,000 was considered a salary increase, which Mason received in his last six months before retiring, Hodel alleges that Mason purposely inflated his pension plan for the Public Employee Retirement System.

But Adams denies the charges, stating that he rejected the offer.

An audit letter from PERS in August 1992, confirmed that the funds were "approved in conjunction with Mr. Adams' retirement."

PERS is planning an audit on Adams this August, according to Tom Britting, chief of the audits division.

Why PERS has decided to conduct an audit is due neither to the district's being randomly selected nor to recent controversy, Britting said.

"We have criteria for which we select organizations," is all that Britting was allowed to disclose.

Hodel sent a letter dated December 8, 1992, to Kenneth W. Marzion, manager of the Compensation Review Section, stating

that Adams had "manipulated" the wording of the minutes sent to PERS so that the \$5,000 read as a salary increase.

Hodel insisted that the increase was actually higher.

Adams currently receives approximately \$2,300 per month in pension benefits.

Hodel also said she feels she was "squeezed out of office" because she was "beginning to catch on with what was happening."

Hodel continued, "I came on as an innocent. As I began to understand the corruption that was going on, I tried to do something about it. I got no support from the other (members) on the board."

"That's why policies weren't passed. Rather than not vote, they'd simply not go to meetings."

Hodel said she missed the filing date for last year's election because she was not reminded by Lincoln. Though it is the responsibility of the board member to file a petition to run, Hodel said she had asked Lincoln twice about the filing date.

Lincoln denied that she was asked about filing dates and that the issue was discussed at meetings prior to the deadline.

"She was called about a month before the deadline," Lincoln said. "We as a district go beyond what other districts do by providing packages for filing. The packages were there (at the office) for almost a month."