

Group announces opposition to Proposition O

Panel says Rainbow Municipal Water District has not given enough details

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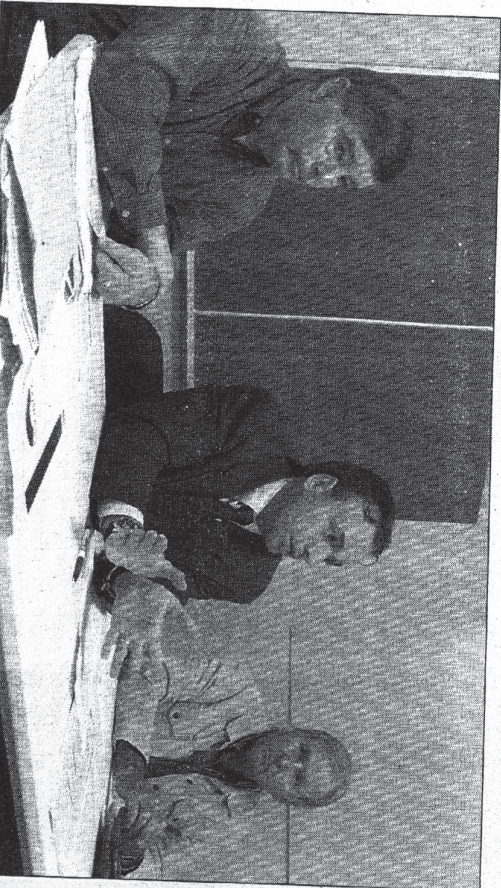
FALLBROOK — Rainbow Municipal Water District voters should reject a \$40.9 million bond issue when they go to the polls March 2, a small group of ratepayers urged Wednesday.

Representatives of the group calling itself the Ratepayers Oversight Committee said the measure the district proposes is too costly. They also said district officials have done a lousy job of providing specifics about the work the bond would fund.

Proposition O is the water district's proposal to raise money to finance repairs throughout its 78-square-mile system. District officials say that amount is only about half of what is actually needed to fully rehabilitate a system that serves nearly 7,000 residents of Fallbrook, Bonsall and Rain-

bow.
Prop. O proposes a 16 percent hike in monthly water rates to pay off the bonds in the next 25 years. If it is rejected, district officials have said they may be forced to act on their own and levy a 71 percent surcharge on monthly bills to do the work they contend is necessary. The measure requires a simple majority of "yes" votes to pass.

Jack Wireman and Ron Thompson, along with an attorney the group hired, Everett



Everett Delano, center, talks about the \$40.9 million bond proposed by the Rainbow Municipal Water District during a news conference Wednesday. A group called the Ratepayers Oversight Committee has announced its opposition to the bond. With Delano is Ron Thompson, left, and Jack Wireman, right.

Delano of Escondido, outlined the reasons for their opposition at a news conference Wednesday at the Fallbrook Community Center.

The trio cited a lack of specifics and said some of the projects such as maintenance of easements appear to have nothing to do with emergency replacement and repairs.

"They've avoided specifics on how the money will be spent except for a general list of projects with descriptions two or three words long," De-

Lano said.

He also contended that the district has failed to complete environmental studies that he argued are required by the California Environmental Quality Review Act. The repair and replacement work could affect air, soil and water quality, Delano said.

"This project will disturb large areas," he said. "If the district had complied with CEQA, it would be a public process where all concerns could be heard and open to public

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scrutiny."

Thompson said higher water costs could force local farmers out of business.

"If agriculture goes out, what will happen to the community," he said. "Rainbow will lose 60 percent of its revenues, and then who will pick up the cost of the bond?"

Thompson also said district officials are trying to scare voters into supporting the bond, citing a flier that says that if the bond is rejected, they would be forced to simply levy

the 71 percent surcharge. Opponents also say the district should scale back its plans.

"We believe the work can be done for a far lower cost than the district says it could," Wireman said, adding that district officials rushed to get the bond measure on the March 2 ballot.

The Ratepayer Oversight Committee was organized in the 1990s to promote an initiative that requires a two-thirds board majority for the district to incur debt in excess of \$1 million. The group claims to have about a dozen active members.

The bond opponents also pointed out that the Rainbow board was split on the question of whether to put the bond on the ballot. Board members William Bopf and Robert Craig voted against it. Board members Tom Clemens, Paul Christensen and Tom Cole voted for it.

Bopf said Wednesday that he voted no because he wanted to give an 18-member committee the board appointed to review its proposal enough time to do its work. That committee is scheduled to present its report to the board at a special meeting at 4 p.m. Monday at district headquarters, 3707 Old Highway 395.

Following the news conference, the water district's general manager, Greg Ensminger, refused much of what

the group said. As repair work proceeded, any required environmental studies would be done, he said.

In addition, a detailed list of projects the bond would finance is available at the district office for anyone to review.

Ensminger also denied that district officials were trying to do too much.

"The district has deferred maintenance in the past, so we're moving fast on a lot of things," he said, adding that the agency's insurance carrier has threatened to drop coverage because of the number of claims filed in recent months from system failures.

"Because we're in an emergency situation, we didn't even have to put this to a vote, but we wanted to let the voters decide whether they wanted to pay for the repairs with long-term financing or on a pay-as-you-go basis."

In May, the board declared a state of emergency in order to perform repairs of more than \$1 million that it said had to be done immediately.

The San Diego County Taxpayers Association, which issues recommendations on bonds that go before voters, is expected to announce its position on the Rainbow measure within the next few days.

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