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COMMENTARY

DIRECTORS DEFEND TIERED WATER RATES

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Article Text:

In June, the East Bay Municipal Utility District Board adopted a progressive water rate structure designed to encourage conservation among all water customers. Now that summer water bills have arrived, many of the largest water users are complaining of higher bills.

The overwhelming majority of the complaints are from angry residential customers who live in the warmest parts of EBMUD's service area, including Walnut Creek and the San Ramon Valley. Many of them have large, landscaped lots (one acre or more in some cases), which require significantly more water to irrigate than smaller lots located in cooler areas.

At the heart of their concern is the residential water rate structure, which considers today's cost of providing water service. It is a four-tier rate structure.

The bottom tier costs \$1.09 per unit of water up to an average of 172 gallons per day during the two-month billing period. A unit of water is 748 gallons.

The second tier is based on a daily average between 173 and 393 gallons per day at a cost of \$1.35 per unit.

The third tier is \$1.50 per unit if average daily use is between 394 and 738 gallons. The fourth tier is \$3.44 per gallon above 738 gallons per day.

The fourth tier was designed to encourage water conservation by EBMUD's largest residential water users and is based on the marginal cost of new water.

The new rate structure was enacted after a two-year study that concluded that it costs more to provide water service to large water users than to smaller water users. The average EBMUD customer is rewarded for conserving water under the new rates.

Let's put water use in perspective. The average household west of the East Bay Hills (Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond) uses 185 gallons per day during the winter and 275 during the summer, while the average household

east of the East Bay Hills (Walnut Creek, San Ramon Valley) uses 250 gallons per day during the winter and 738 during the summer.

Many of the large users from whom we've heard use significantly more than 738 gallons a day during summer. They represent the top 8 percent high-volume residential consumers some of whom use as much as 3,000 gallons a day during the summer. They tell us that the fourth-tier rate is punitive and should be eliminated in order to accommodate their outdoor watering needs.

The new rate structure sends a strong message that EBMUD's water supply is limited (even with last year's heavy rainfall). It also is a wake-up call to customers regardless of where they live to rethink how we use this precious resource indoors and out.

This may require redesigning our landscape (to reduce water-guzzling large lawn areas with other types of attractive ground cover), installing more efficient irrigation systems (such as drip irrigation), and changing watering patterns (such as watering at night) as many customers throughout the East Bay are doing.

Whatever the approach, EBMUD remains committed to helping customers maximize efficiency and savings through a variety of water conservation services and incentives.

Gioia is the president of the EBMUD Board and Selkirk is a member.

Caption:
Photo, Mug of John Gioia.

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