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Contentious discussion over water districts at Clearlake breakfast forum



Magen Estep and Sarah Miller at the Judges Breakfast in Clearlake on Thursday. (Nikki Carboni for the Record-Bee).



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CLEARLAKE– The conversation got as hot as the temperature this Thursday at the Judge’s Breakfast in Clearlake. Office Manager Magen Estep alongside Administrative Assistant Sarah Miller from the Highlands Mutual Water District presented an overview of the water company as well as the challenges it faces in the future.

Miller began the PowerPoint with an explanation of the main difference between Highlands Mutual and Konocti County Water District noting, “We are a mutual water company so we are essentially owned by our customers, our shareholders. When you purchase a home in our district you also purchase a share.” She introduced Frank Costner who elaborated. “We are a government agency, our five board members control Konocti Water District and they are elected officials... so we are locally controlled.” The water district representatives also explained their separate districts areas as well as their compliance with all state water standards.

Miller noted the Highlands System Model which has been redefined to include city zoning to accommodate growth as well as current information on hydrants. This model shows a “well running system” which includes “A total of 11,400 feet of new pipe in the last five years, 6,400 feet from Highlands, 3,300 from developers and 1,700 feet from grants” according to Miller. Although they have received grants, previously state regulation now establishes grant funds to be awarded only to water districts that are out of compliance, Highlands no longer qualifies for this funding as they are fully compliant.

This brought Miller to the topic of development costs. He said, “Best industry practice calls on developers to pay for the costs to support new projects, water, fire, power, school and city fees.”

They both explained how connection fees remain competitive at below industry standards and that Highlands does not believe the costs for new development should not be passed along to shareholders. This sparked a few questions, with one resident asking for the company's financial records. Estep responded that such information is available to shareholders on request. Mark Cooper asked about the IGA Foods situation of not having adequate pressure to run fire sprinklers, which had been brought up at a prior breakfast meeting. It was promptly answered by Estep who said, "Unfortunately they didn't have a lot of historical data on a lot of fire flow information." She continued that engineer consultants had been hired to investigate these claims but was found to be functioning properly. Estep added, "We offered to buy a pump for the store, whatever it was going to take to help them out, but it turns out the fire flows were just fine."

Miller explained how Highlands faces the challenges of keeping up with state regulations and requirements while limiting the impact on rates, coupled by unpredictable weather patterns and the socioeconomics of the Clearlake community. The company expressed a need for more communication and collaboration going forward. "We need to work for each other not against each other." Residents agreed they have all seen signs around town that say "Save Highlands Water." Miller said The city is trying to re-seat the board with an entire city council by proxy votes. "They are being very aggressive and trying to put things out that are not factual." She continued, "We don't want to be taken over, we are not for sale." She added that she believes the company believes the city of Clearlake is attempting to profit off of the water district. "We want to work with the city not against the city. Why fix something that's not broken so let's make a better relationship." She added the company needed to work together with the city for the betterment of the community not against it.

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The Clearlake City Council held a meeting Thursday evening regarding this matter with Highlands Water Company.

The Judge's Breakfast is held every Thursday Morning at 7 a.m. at the Clearlake Masonic Lodge and is available to the public. Purchase is not required to participate and next week's speaker is Board of Supervisors Chair Bruno Sabatier, scheduled to speak about the Clear Lake Project.

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