

THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

Tank talks continues

By Spencer Cole

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“Aqua Man”

“Aqua Man” Sebastian Mejia delivers potable water to the drought-affected houses on East Cleo and River avenues in July. Mejia delivers water five days a week to a dozen houses each day in the East Porterville area.

“If we do this and lose a water source, we’ll have 200 tanks out there we can’t fill and then homeowners we can’t help because we are helping [the rental properties] and then the homeowners might have to foreclose,” he said. “What kind of detrimental alliance will we have created?”

Paul Boyer, a program director with nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises in Visalia said he had observed successful implementations of similar tank plans for rentals in Mariposa and Stanislaus counties during his work over the past year.

“Not everyone is the same,” he said. “Sure there are slumlords but there are also family properties that rent to other family members and low-income landlords that are struggling.”

Boyer said the proposal within the tank installation plan that would involve moving families out of waterless areas was ostensibly flawed.

“A lot of these people have been without water for more than a year. If they could move, they would have done so by now,” he said.

Boyer said his organization estimated at least 350 rental units in Tulare County had no access to water.

“And we think there are a lot of people not reporting,” he said. “This program, unfortunately, I do not think [it] will be able to meet the needs of all those tenants.”

Daniel Peñaloza, 22, a coordinator and Central Valley representative for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, said that many tenants who are or are going to be affected had little say in the issue.

Much skepticism on proposed relocations

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors ended their Tuesday morning meeting with more questions than answers following a discussion about the county’s Household Tank Program.

“It’s abundantly clear that this is not a cost consideration or an administrative burden. It’s more so a constraint on water,” said Andrew Lockman, emergency services manager for Tulare County.

Many areas like Dinuba and East Porterville that have been hit particularly hard by the drought are already at or near 100 percent allocation of available water, Lockman said. The majority of the need, he said, continues to be in the southern portion of the county. “We’re quickly running out of water there.”

Lockman said he wouldn’t have brought the issue to the board if not for concerns about the sustainability of the tank program.

“Most of these people are farmworkers,” he said. “The time conflict with this meeting — 9 a.m. — is a huge issue for them.”

Peñaloza lobbied for tanks to be available on rental properties while at the same time admitting that relocation may be preferable in some cases. Regardless, he called for better representation of the communities currently under consideration.

“The residents should have the ability to speak,” he said.

Sandra Garcia of East Porterville, communicating to the board via a translator, said that forcing families to relocate would be a disaster.

“There’s already less work due to the water,” she said. “Some people have to drive two hours [just] to get to their job in the fields.”

Garcia said forcing families to leave their homes — some which have been occupied by renters for 20, even 30 years — would deprive them of rides to work, the doctor and school, and destroy the delicate social structures that many use to barely get by.

“Sometimes [the people working in the fields] get home late. They rely on their neighbors to watch their children,” she said.

Garcia urged the supervisors to do everything in their power to keep struggling communities like East Porterville intact. “There will be impacts; communities [are] already being killed by a lack of water and will hurt even worse by forcing (people) to move.”

The board, while unable to reach a firm decision, did seem to show progress by the meeting’s end.

“There isn’t a blanket approach [to this]. We need to look at it on a case-by-case basis,” Lockman said. “We don’t want slumlords putting people in substandard living conditions and benefiting from the county. I ask that we take each tenant owner situation and look at them individually. Is this a Band-Aid or does it have potential at leading toward a long-term fix?”

As it stands, the board voted in favor of the county continuing to provide and deliver water for tenants with an expansion of services to renters with the state backing the move financially. However, improvements to tank and plumbing installations on private property still remain the responsibility of landlords.

A decision on whether to tag homes of landlords that continue to exploit tenants by placing them in houses without access to water was tabled, and will be deliberated at a future meeting.