

The Porterville Recorder

Well agreement approved

By Kelli Ballard

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Officials move to quickly hook up homes in East Porterville

Porterville City Council Tuesday approved an agreement between the city and Tulare County that gives the city a new well in exchange for providing water for East Porterville residents. The Tulare County Supervisors are expected to consider the pact on April 12.

"I'm really, really excited about what's happening," said Fred Beltran, a volunteer with the Porterville Area Coordinating Council, which has helped drought victims. "This thing's moving so fast."

Homes where water wells have gone dry have 1,500-2,500 gallon potable water tanks connected to the plumbing inside homes. The state has agreed to pay for connections to the city's water system for about 425 homes in East Porterville, but that number could go higher.

The first step, City Manager John Lollis said, will be to connect 40 homes that are located along existing water lines along Date Avenue in East Porterville.

Part of the agreement also calls to connect homes in the Vandalia Avenue area that are not connected to the city's system and whose wells have gone dry. Those homes were annexed into the city in 2006.

Although the plan is to connect about 500 homes as soon as possible, Lollis said, "We're probably talking about, in the East Porterville area, another 200 to 300 homes that will probably be experiencing well outages as this drought continues into the summer months or additional folks come forward with their wells dry."

This step marks just the beginning of the of the plan between the state, county and city. "There is a hard charge ahead right now in developing an East Porterville water grant ultimate connection of 1,800 connections," Lollis said.

Homeowners who connect to city services will be required to sign an irrevocable annexation agreement which states that the property will be annexed at a future date, no matter who owns the home at the time. Homeowners will also be required to abandon their current wells.

"If they choose not to connect, the provision of the state support would be terminated, and they would no longer be provided with [tank] water or bottled water," Lollis said.

However, there may be an exception to the well-abandonment rule for properties that have a well being used strictly for livestock. Only private wells being used for household needs would be required to be abandoned.

"That could potentially be an impediment to some people who want to connect to the city water system," said Ryan Jensen, co-founder of East Porterville Residents for Water Justice. He asked the council to reconsider. "At least consider the possibility of some kind of flexibility with that well-abandonment policy or some form of consideration of exemption."

Juanita Baldo, a west-side resident whose well went dry, asked if there would be any help for those not on the east side.

Greg Farley, drought manager for the state Department of Water Resources, told Baldo that the agency is "looking at different opportunities to help the small systems," adding there are other programs such as Self Help Enterprises that provide loans and grants for private wells.

Farley and Eric Lamoureux, regional administrator for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, praised the city for its cooperation in getting help to drought victims on the east side.

"Let's get some permanent connections made," Lamoureux said. "Let's begin removing tanks from people's property. Get them set into a reliable, sustainable water system."

Lamoureux said the state has never backed away from the issues in East Porterville and it plans to continue to seek a permanent solution. "There will continue to be work to look at what we need for East Porterville and where we can provide additional support for the city through these dialogues," he said.

The work to connect East Porterville residents should begin soon.

"I'm very optimistic we're going to be able to get there in the next couple of months. We can start to see some immediate work being done," Lamoureux said.

Part of the well agreement is the state will retain access to three million gallons of water per month from the well for extreme emergencies.

"I do want to reiterate that the drought is not over. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done," Farley said.