

# THE SUN GAZETTE

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## ‘Wonderful’: Tooleville relieved in state’s force for water consolidation

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### **State Water Board issues letter giving Exeter and Tooleville six months to negotiate a voluntary consolidation, or face a mandatory order**

TOOLEVILLE – Last week, the State Water Board finally intervened in the unincorporated area of Tooleville’s 20-year struggle to obtain the basic human right to clean drinking water with a letter to the city of Exeter and the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association, giving the two parties six months to hash out terms for a voluntary consolidation of Tooleville to Exeter’s water system or face a mandatory order with much less cooperation.

Maria Olivera, a Tooleville resident since 1974 and board member of the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association, said the residents of the two-road town plagued with undrinkable water due to contaminants like the cancerous heavy metal hexavalent chromium and nitrates from farming fertilizers and septic tanks are happy and relieved to see the state step in after so many years of struggle.

“Relieved, really happy, like, relaxed now,” Olivera said. “We’re finally getting help. It’s wonderful.”

Blanca Escobedo, the Tulare County regional policy manager with Leadership Counsel, an advocacy organization that helps communities like Tooleville with legal counsel and negotiation strategies, said she and other community-based organizations have been working for years towards consolidation between Tooleville and Exeter, and the news of the letter from the State Water Board was very well received.

“[Tooleville’s residents] look forward to hopefully working with the city of Exeter in the coming months and coming up with a solution together,” Escobedo said. “We just hope that [Exeter] comes to the table again and resumes talks...we know in the past they’ve been hesitant.”

Exeter City Manager Adam Ennis did not respond to multiple requests for comment with The Sun-Gazette. When Tooleville came knocking to consolidate their water system with their neighbor’s in September 2019, Exeter’s city council turned them down. Just a month prior, Exeter published their water system master plan under Ennis’ leadership, which identified some serious shortcomings in the city’s water infrastructure.

Escobedo said they’re currently working with the residents of Tooleville on a plan to reach out to Exeter to hopefully open discussions.

“We’re now very optimistic that they’ll want to resume talks,” Escobedo said. “Once we resume talks, we can hopefully communicate what the benefits to both communities will be.”

The State Water Board offers to pay for consolidation projects, in addition to providing millions of dollars in incentive monies to upgrade the water infrastructure of the receiving system in the consolidation, which in this case would be Exeter.

The next board meeting for the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association is Oct. 25, where Olivera and the board members will figure out how to move forward. Andi Galdamez, a development specialist with nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises who works with Olivera and the board with technical assistance and funding opportunities, said that help is on the way for Tooleville's recent woes after one of their two active wells, the Alfred Street well, stopped producing water July 21.

Self-Help and the county are working to get a 10,000 water tank to Tooleville within the next few weeks. Galdamez said the details of where and how to get the tank into Tooleville are still being ironed out, as the street and where the well is located is too narrow to get a truck through.

"We want them to have a storage tank so that overnight the tank fills up, and it will improve their water pressure," Galdamez said. "That's why the pump is going to be connected from the tank to the well site."

Tooleville is still on a boil water notice after their water pressure dropped below 50 psi, the threshold where the water pressure no longer self-seals cracks or leaks which allows for bacteria to get into the system. Low water pressure poses another safety issue for the many Tooleville residents because many use swamp coolers located on their roofs. If pumps can't create enough pressure, it renders the A/C units essentially useless. Self-Help is also in the process of contracting a rehab of both the Alfred Street and Morgan Street wells to improve production and water pressure.

Interestingly enough, the county was completely left out of the letter from the State Water Board, despite Tooleville being an unincorporated area falling under county jurisdiction. The county recently passed its interim spending plan for the over \$90 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)—the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill signed into law by President Joe Biden in March to help Americans recover from the perils of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—funds, with a focus on uplifting unincorporated areas.

Over \$14 million was allocated to water infrastructure, much of it drinking water-related with places like Tipton, Earlimart, Poplar, Ivanhoe, Cutler and Orosi receiving hefty investments in groundwater wells, storage tanks and wastewater treatment plants—but Tooleville was left off of the list.