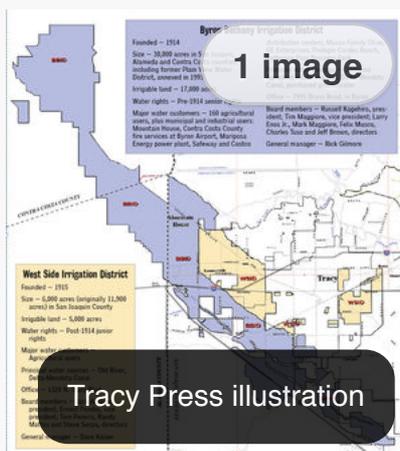


Water districts consider merger



The boards of Byron Bethany Irrigation District and West Side Irrigation District have been meeting to discuss merging the two districts. Byron Bethany (violet) covers 30,000 acres in three counties west and north of Tracy, including the community of Mountain House, while West Side (yellow) serves 6,000 acres in and around the city.



By Sam Matthews | Posted 3 days ago

Two major Tracy area irrigation districts, both struggling to secure sufficient water in the face of drought-triggered state restrictions and legal challenges, have launched serious merger discussions.

Representatives of the West Side and Byron Bethany irrigation districts — both established more than a century ago — have reported that talks during the past month could lead to establishment of a single 36,000-acre district sometime this year.

A merger would join the smaller, 6,000-acre West Side Irrigation District, which encompasses land mostly west of Tracy but also surrounding three sides of the urban area, with the 30,000-acre Byron Bethany district, which has land northwest of Tracy extending north into the Byron area and also including land in the former Plain View Water District along the Delta-Mendota Canal.

As Tracy has grown, farmland originally in the West Side district has been annexed to the city, reducing the district's acreage from the original 11,900 acres to the present 6,000.

Although merger talks are in their first stages, the State Water Resources Control Board has already combined the districts' separate hearings on charges of unauthorized diversion of river water into a joint hearing on March 21.

Jack Alvarez, president of the WSID board of directors, said the merger talks were aimed at providing "a win-win outcome" for both districts by establishing a stronger district able to better represent the interests of the districts and their water customers.

"The state for the last couple of years has beaten us up pretty good, so this offer came along to merge with BBID, and the time has come to explore the possibility of a merger with BBID," he said.

Alvarez said a possible merger had been discussed privately among land owners in the district over the years, and the board was giving it serious consideration.

He also noted that he and Ernest Pombo, the West Side board vice president, were aware that a merger, if finally given approval by both districts, would close West Side's 100-year history as an independent district — and also end two generations of Alvarez and Pombo families as WSID board members, beginning when their fathers, the late Pete Alvarez and Ernest Pombo Sr., became longtime directors in the 1950s.

Both Alvarez and Rick Gilmore, general manager of Byron Bethany, reported that they had encountered no opposition to a merger from land owners in their districts.

"The districts complement each other ... and we have a number of agreements over the years in moving water around," Gilmore said. "Both districts have agreed to some thresholds for going forward with our discussions."

The two districts have traditionally pumped irrigation water from Delta waterways and from the Delta-Mendota Canal. Restrictions on accessing both sources of water have resulted in conflicts between the districts and the State Water Resources Control Board.

The boards of both districts have provided representatives to an ad hoc committee charged with examining all aspects of the proposed merger.

Representing Byron Bethany are Russell Kagehiro, board president; Tim Maggiore, a board member from the Byron area; and Gilmore.

From West Side are Alvarez; Tom Pereira, a board member from the Tracy area; and Dave Kaiser, district general manager.

Committee members first visited West Side district facilities near Tracy and later met in the district office on Tracy Boulevard to look at financial and operational issues.

Gilmore said they will report their findings to their boards of directors in public sessions, "creating an open process."

While the possibility of a merger has been the periodic topic of informal discussions over the years, a letter urging the districts to move forward toward a merger was sent last month to both

boards by Mike Sandhu of Sandhu Bros., Tracy-based almond growers and processors who have orchards in both districts.

Sandhu said he felt that with all the challenges facing the districts to secure sufficient water and deal with the state, there was a growing need to eliminate duplication of efforts, including two boards, two staffs and two sets of legal advisers.

The Sandhu letters were placed on the agendas of January meetings of both boards for discussion in open sessions.

If merger talks proceed and are given final approval, a district reorganization and plan would be submitted to the San Joaquin County Local Agency Formation Commission, which establishes public-agency boundaries. Elections would be required only if major opposition surfaced.

If LAFCo flashes the green light, possibly sometime in the next several months, then the merger could be completed before the end of the year.

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