

Water questions for Benicia candidates

By Elizabeth Patterson, Benicia Mayor
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At Benicia candidate forums some candidates talk about the cost of water and how if elected they will "freeze" water rates or subsidize water costs for those who are less able to pay. Ask the following questions and find a few answers below.

1. Does the candidate separate water costs/billing from sewer costs/billing?
2. Does the candidate know and state that California voters need to modify Proposition 218 - see below - in order to subsidize the cost of water and sewer? Being able to deliver promises should be a vital part of decision making by voters.
3. Does the candidate know that the city subsidizes water bills for those who qualify for federal poverty level (and speaking of the feds, any chance the poverty level will be modified to reflect reality?) The city spends over \$350,000 out of the general fund to subsidize qualified residents. That is money not spent on those pot holes that some candidates are promising to fill. To make matters worse, mostly Republican leaders in the state are supporting repeal of the new gas tax which was brought up to date after "freezing" the rate for a quarter of a century. Maintaining and fixing city streets based on rates that were frozen at 25-year-old rates has the same effect as freezing water rates - things break and don't get fixed and cost way more in the end.
4. Does the candidate acknowledge that Benicia water rates are in the middle of surrounding communities - lower than Contra Costa's? Does the candidate know that the cost of water is infrastructure and not the price of water? State water is \$25/acre foot. One acre-foot of water would supply the indoor and outdoor needs of two typical urban households for a year and one that is changing amid drought (or drought worries) and as household habits and improved technology help people make the most of the water they have.

Buying water from others in Solano County averages about \$200 an acre foot. One candidate has suggested we rely less on state water and buy from others in the county. Do the math. [Some may bring up the fact that we pay State Water Contract for 17,500 acre feet and we only use about 12,000 acre feet. This is solved by "transferring" the unused water to those who need it - for no less than \$200 an acre foot and potentially much more].

Does the candidate talk about water recycling? All water is recycled and reused as a part of natural water processes such as the hydrologic cycle. Human-made water recycling, also known as water reclamation or water reuse, centers on using treated wastewater. Recycling wastewater can extend water supplies, improve water quality, [reduce discharge and disposal costs of wastewater](#), and save energy.

5. And my favorite candidate solution - build new development for economic development that will pay for infrastructure maintenance. New development requires more miles of water pipes

and streets which will need to be maintained. "Frozen taxes and fees" is an equation that is not healthy and won't make for reliable city services.

6. Ask what is a healthy city economic plan that provides health in all things with resources for the future so the next generation has the same healthy city.

The country's cheapest water is in the West's driest cities

<https://www.hcn.org/articles/water-the-countrys-cheapest-water-prices-are-in-the-west-s-driest-cities>

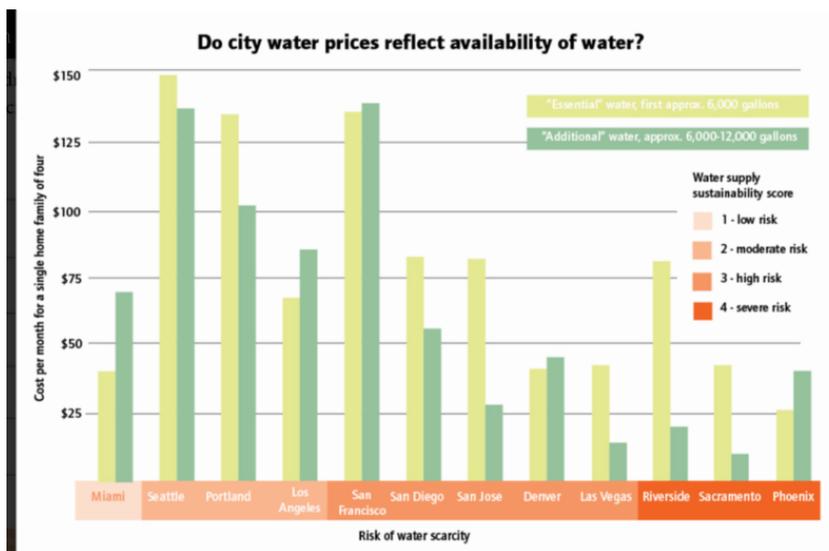
By charging more for nonessential gallons, cities could keep water affordable for everyone. Maya L. Kapoor News Oct. 5, 2018

If water were priced according to demand, many Westerners would be smelly and thirsty. But water is a necessity, and demand-based pricing would be unethical.

Instead, many cities rely on block pricing for residential use, charging different amounts for essential water and for additional water. Done right, block pricing should encourage conservation while still letting everyone meet their needs: The cost of essential water, used for basics such as clothes washing, staying hydrated, bathing or cooking, is low, while additional water - say, for growing a lush lawn in the desert - costs more.

But according to new research, that's not the reality across the West.

Economists and a public policy expert at the University of Minnesota who looked into block pricing for water in the nation's largest urban areas, including 11 Western cities, discovered a pattern they conclude is **neither sustainable nor just**: Many of the driest cities have the cheapest water prices. What's more, for households across the West, the average price of water goes down as use goes up.



In many Western cities, using under 6,000 gallons of water a month has a higher price tag for households than the next nonessential 6,000 to 12,000 gallons they might use.

Source: Ian H. Luby, Stephan Polasky, Deborah L. Swackhamer. Infographic by Luna Anna Archey
The researchers used the Natural Resources Defense Council's 2010 Water Sustainability Index rankings - which combine factors such as climate change projections, drought vulnerability and future demand - to predict water scarcity for the biggest cities in the nation's 35 most populous metropolitan areas.

They used approximately 6,000 gallons as a "generous" estimate of how much water a family of four in one home needs each month for basics. (Across the nation, Americans in this category actually use, on average, almost 9,000 gallons each month.)

Phoenix, a region facing extreme risk for water scarcity, charges \$27 for the first 6,000 gallons per month, the lowest price for essential residential water. Meanwhile, the most expensive water prices are in some of the West's wettest cities, including Seattle, which charges about \$150 for the same amount.



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As alarming as it may be for water to cost so little in a desert city with an average rainfall of just eight inches a year, Phoenix's water management policy is arguably more just, because **necessary water is cheap, while additional water is more expensive.** Phoenix charges 55 percent more for additional water use, more than any

other Western city, and per capita water use has fallen in recent decades even as the city has grown. Still, the West overall has catching up to do: The greatest charge for additional water use nationally is in Miami, where nonessential water costs 73 percent more than essential water.

Indeed, in almost all of the Western cities studied, water costs less on average when used more. For example, in Sacramento, a northern California city with an extreme water scarcity risk, nonessential water costs 75 percent less to use than essential water.

Regulations can create a hurdle for Western cities hoping to use block pricing to make water access both sustainable and fair. **In California, for example, state law Proposition 218 outlaws water prices that are higher than the cost of providing water. That rule effectively stops block pricing from being a sustainability tool, because high prices on nonessential water can't be used to encourage conservation or to keep the price of essential water low.** Meanwhile, as Western cities struggle to solve their water pricing dilemma, it's only getting worse: **Climate change is making water shortages ever more likely in the West's most populous places, but with current policies, future water shortages will be difficult to meet in a way that's fair.**

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