

Proposition 218 Protest Election Process: “The Yolo Way”

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury reviewed the notification process Yolo County uses when conducting Proposition 218 protest elections after receiving a series of complaints regarding management of the Wild Wings County Service Area (Wild Wings CSA). After considering the numerous issues raised in the complaints, the Grand Jury narrowed the scope of its investigation to the Proposition 218 protest election notification process in Yolo County.

Proposition 218 restricts local governments’ ability to impose assessments and property related fees and property tax assessments to pay for specific services (i.e. water, sewer, lighting, etc.). While there are a number of traditional election formats outlined by Proposition 218, it also provides for a "protest election". These "protest elections" are unique in that a "yes" vote is cast by doing nothing and a "no" vote is cast by filing a protest with the governmental body holding the election. For Proposition 218 “protest elections” within the jurisdiction of Yolo County, the Board of Supervisors is required to send the notice of a Proposition 218 election to affected residents and property owners, advise them they can file a “protest,” and hold a public hearing to collect and tabulate “votes”.

The Grand Jury found that the Yolo County notification process meets the minimum standards required by Proposition 218. However, the Grand Jury discovered that other jurisdictions within Yolo County, and local governmental jurisdictions within California, provide better election notifications that are clearer, more informative, and encourage wider participation by residents and homeowners.

The Grand Jury calls on Yolo County to implement a Proposition 218 protest election process which:

- provides information to voters that fully describes the protest election process in an easily readable and understandable fashion;
- ensures eligible voters receive an easily understandable ballot with clear directions regarding how to submit a protest vote; and
- encourages public participation.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury received three complaints regarding the Wild Wings County Service Area (CSA). The complaints raised questions regarding the fiscal operations of the newly acquired golf course, the management of the loans and reserves for the CSA and whether the Proposition 218 election in 2013 complied with the law.

The Grand Jury found no fiscal improprieties within the Wild Wings CSA. The Grand Jury did find reason to further investigate the Proposition 218 protest election process.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury reviewed the complaints and interviewed managers, staff and elected officials from the County of Yolo and residents of the Wild Wings CSA. In addition to the interviews, the Grand Jury reviewed the following documents:

- Yolo County Administrative Policy Manual (APM);
- County Service Area 2013-14 Budget Information;
- Wild Wings County Service Area Formation Document dated May 25, 2004;
- Wild Wings CSA Golf Course/Recreation Advisory Sub-Committee Formation Document, dated June 2, 2009;
- Text of Proposition 218;
http://www.lao.ca.gov/1996/120196_prop_218/understanding_prop218_1296.html
- Proposition 218 Implementation Guide, League of California Cities;
<http://www.cacities.org/UploadedFiles/LeagueInternet/c2/c2f1ce7c-2b14-45fe-9aaa-d3dd2e0ffecc.pdf>
- Proposition 218 documents for Wild Wings Homeowners; and
- Proposition 218 notices from other counties and local agencies.

The last interview was conducted on March 3, 2014.

DISCUSSION

County Service Areas

Yolo County provides some public services through County Service Areas (CSA). A CSA is a branch of county government that provides funding and management for a wide range of public services including lighting, fire protection, road maintenance, potable water supply, and wastewater treatment and disposal. It may also provide a limited number of these or other services depending on how and for what purpose it was formed. Each CSA provides public service needs unique to a particular community or neighborhood. Eleven CSAs have been established in Yolo County.

CSA Advisory Committees (CSA Committee) are established within each CSA to provide oversight of the delivery of services and financial status of each CSA. Services to these unique areas are funded initially in a manner similar to Special Districts through enactment of a parcel tax. A CSA Committee may also request the County hold an election under the provisions of Proposition 218 to fund existing services or to provide new services within a CSA.

CSA Committees are composed of community members who reside within the boundaries of the CSA for which that particular committee provides oversight. CSA committee members are appointed by the Yolo County Board of Supervisors. The CSA Committees act solely in an advisory capacity and may only make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding the services provided by the CSAs. The ultimate authority regarding governance of a CSA resides with the Board of Supervisors.

Additional oversight of the CSA is provided by the Yolo County Department of Planning and Public Works (PPW). The PPW provides oversight through a County Service Area Manager (CSAM). The CSAM attends CSA Committee meetings, provides advice to the CSA Committee, and acts as a liaison between the CSA Committees and the Board of Supervisors. The CSAM also assists the Board of Supervisors in providing oversight of a Proposition 218 election process.

Proposition 218

Proposition 218 is contained in the California Constitution, Article XIII D. It limits the authority of government agencies to impose property related fees or charges, including water rates. Like other taxpayer protections in California, Proposition 218 requires government agencies to follow certain procedures to adopt or increase water rates and limits those rates to the amounts necessary to provide the property related service.

In general, citizens understand the term “election” to mean that they will cast a vote on a ballot as they would in any other general election. This is not always the case with a Proposition 218 election where most of the increases to the cost for services will result from a “protest election.” In a “protest election”, if the residents or property owners oppose the proposed increase, they must submit a ballot in the form of a letter of protest prior to, or at, a public hearing scheduled to act on the matter. Residents who support the proposed increase “vote” by taking no action.

As with any other legislation or law, Proposition 218 provides only the basic requirements for implementation. The public agency has the ability to determine its own procedures as long as the basic requirements are met. Generally these requirements include a minimum amount of time a notice must be issued prior to the hearing date or a statement that an increase cannot be passed if a majority of the residents submit protest letters. Proposition 218 does not specifically state how the public notice is to be written or how much information should be included in this notice.

Wild Wings County Service Area

The Wild Wings CSA was initially created in 2004 to provide oversight of the operation and maintenance of the potable water delivery and waste water treatment systems for the Wild Wings development. The Wild Wings development is composed of approximately 330 homes. In 2009 Yolo County acquired the Wild Wings Golf Club, which is located within the development. The oversight of the operation of the golf club then became the responsibility of the Wild Wings CSA.

During 2013, a Proposition 218 “protest election” was held on a proposed increase in the utility rates paid by the residents of Wild Wings. In accordance with the requirements of Proposition 218, the County drafted and mailed the required notice of a public hearing which took place on July 16, 2013. At the conclusion of the public hearing, the Board of Supervisors voted to pass the increases. There are no records indicating whether any Wild Wings residents attended the public hearing and no record that any protests to the proposed rate increase were filed.

Although the County complied with Proposition 218 during the 2013 election, the County provided only a minimum amount of information to residents regarding the voting procedure. The 2013 Wild Wings Proposition 218 public notice stated that written protests could be received at, or prior to, the public hearing. The notice did not clearly state that residents who opposed the increase would need to file a protest in order to “vote” against it nor did it advise residents as to the form a protest letter should take.

Administration of Proposition 218 Elections in Yolo County

The Grand Jury was not able to identify any written procedures maintained by Yolo County for the management of a Proposition 218 “protest election” within its jurisdiction. The Grand Jury learned that the County does not have an established policy or practice for receiving and recording election protests.

The Grand Jury found it difficult to locate and review the past Proposition 218 information within Yolo County. There is no specific collector and keeper of these records within the County and no location where a resident could go to review previously held Proposition 218 election records.

The Grand Jury learned that Yolo County did not offer Proposition 218 information in multiple languages during the 2013 Wild Wings CSA election.

Proposition 218 Notices of Public Hearing

The Grand Jury reviewed Proposition 218 public notices issued by other agencies within Yolo County and other regions of California and found that the amount of information contained in Proposition 218 public notices varied widely from agency to agency, and among the various local governmental agencies within Yolo County.

For example, the Grand Jury reviewed Proposition 218 public notices from the City of Woodland. In addition to meeting the minimum requirements of the proposition, the City of Woodland also issued the Proposition 218 notice in multiple languages, informed the residents exactly how to participate in the process and included a statement explaining that if a majority of the residents protested, the increases could not be implemented. The Proposition 218 notice reviewed by the Grand Jury from the City of Davis also was specific in informing the citizens how to effectively protest the action.

The Grand Jury compared the Wild Wings notice of a public hearing with one from San Diego. The Grand Jury believes that the San Diego notice contained all of the important

information that should be provided to residents and homeowners when a Proposition 218 “protest election” occurs. The San Diego notice:

- showed evidence of thoughtful graphic design intended to draw people’s attention to the information;
- specified who could file a protest (one written protest per affected property);
- specified what should be in the protest, and included a form that could be used as the protest letter;
- indicated that the information is available in alternative formats for disabled and non-English speaking residents;
- stated the consequence of a successful protest, and defined a successful protest.

The following graphic illustrates the visual difference between the two notices with the Yolo County example to the right overlapping the San Diego example.

Visual Comparison of San Diego Notice of Public Hearing and Yolo County Notice of Public Hearing

You Can Protest the Proposed Rate Adjustment
 You can use the form in this notice to register your protest against the proposed water rate adjustment. You can also choose to write a letter to the City, following the requirements below, or appear at the public hearing listed on the front cover of this notice to submit your written protest.

How Can I Participate?
 Interested parties can comment on the proposed rates. California Constitution Article XIII D section 6 (Proposition 218) prohibits the City from implementing the new rates if a majority of the affected property owners or tenants file written protests opposing the rates before the end of the public hearing. Only one written protest per affected property will be counted towards the majority protest. Written protests must be received by the City Clerk, City of San Diego, Mail Station No. 21, City Administration Building, 202 C Street, San Diego, CA 92101, before the end of the public hearing which is scheduled for 10:00 a.m., November 21, 2013. Each protest must identify the affected property (by street address or Assessor's Parcel Number) and include the signature of the property owner or utility customer of record. In compliance with Proposition 218, e-mail protests will not be accepted. Fax protests will also not be accepted. Although oral comments at the public hearing will not qualify as formal protests unless accompanied by a written protest, the City Council welcomes input from the community during the public hearing.

Some customers will receive multiple notices
 In order to ensure that all San Diegans are informed about possible water rate increases, these Notices are being sent to all City of San Diego water customers. If you are responsible for more than one bill, you will receive more than one Notice.

USE THIS FORM TO PROTEST THE PROPOSED WATER RATE INCREASE

_____, (Print first and last name) protest this proposed increase to water rates.

Property Address or Assessor's Parcel Number: _____

Signature: _____

If you wish to use this form as your protest, please fill out and mail in a stamped envelope to: City Clerk, City of San Diego, City Administration Building, 202 C Street, MS 2P, San Diego, CA 92101 or deliver it to the City Clerk before the end of the Public Hearing on November 21, 2013.

This material is available in alternative formats upon request to accommodate persons with disabilities or non-English speakers. To order information in an alternative format, or to arrange for a sign language or oral interpreter at the November 21, 2013 hearing, please call the Clerk's office on or before November 8, 2013 at (619) 533-4000 (voice) or (619) 236-7012 (TTY).

San Diego Notice of Public Hearing
 Excerpt from full document located at: <http://www.sandiego.gov/water/pdf/rates/jan20142015publichearingnotice.pdf>

THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Notice of Public Hearing

The San Diego City Council will hold a public hearing to consider a proposed water rate increase primarily as a result of an increase by the San Diego County Water Authority for the wholesale cost of water.

Interested parties are invited to attend. Read inside to learn more.

November 21, 2013
10:00 a.m.
 City Administration Building
 202 "C" Street, 12th Floor
 Council Chambers

Thereafter, fees shall not increase by more than the Consumer Price Index (CPI-W and CPI-U) for the San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA area for the most recent February to February as compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

At 9:00 a.m. (or as soon thereafter as circumstances permit) on July 16, 2013, in the Board of Supervisors Chambers, at 625 Court Street, Room 206, Woodland, California, the Board of Supervisors will hold a Public Hearing to consider the proposed fee increases, and to receive and consider all public comments, including but not limited to any protests against the proposed fee increases.

The water service that is the subject of this proposed increase is described in a fee rate analysis on file with the Clerk of the Board at 625 Court Street, Room 204, Woodland, California. This represents the estimated annual cost of providing water service to each parcel within the Wild Wings County Service Area.

A detailed fee analysis is available to the public concerning the proposed fee increases, including the cost or estimated cost of providing the service for which each fee is proposed to be charged, the revenue sources anticipated to provide the service (including general fund revenues), and the bases of the allocation of the cost of the services. This information is available for review at the Office of the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors, at 625 Court Street, Room 204, Woodland, California.

All interested persons are invited to attend and be heard at the time of the hearing. As provided in the County Service Area Law, Government Code 25210.77a and following, any interested person may file a written protest with the Clerk of the Board at 625 Court Street, Room 204, Woodland, California, at or before the close of the public hearing.

Additional information regarding the proposed fee may be obtained from Regina Espinoza, County Service Area Manager, at (530) 666-8725.

Dated: May 21, 2013

Julie Daehler
 Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

By: _____
 Deputy
 (SEAL)

Yolo County Proposition 218 Notice of Public Hearing
 Excerpt from full document located at: <http://www.yolocounty.org/home/showdocument?id=23040>

FINDINGS

- F1. Yolo County met the minimum requirements of Proposition 218 for a proposed utility rate increase in Wild Wings, but did not adequately and clearly inform the residents how to successfully protest an election.
- F2. Yolo County does not have a written set of procedures for the management of the Proposition 218 election process within its jurisdiction.
- F3. It is not easy to locate or access all supporting documentation regarding a specific Proposition 218 action.
- F4. There are other jurisdictions within Yolo County that have provided more detailed information to their residents about how a Proposition 218 “protest election” works.
- F5. Yolo County does not issue Proposition 218 related notices in languages other than English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. By October 1, 2014, the County Administrative Officer shall work with the County Counsel, Clerk of the Board of Supervisors and the Department of Planning & Public Works to develop a set of procedures for a Proposition 218 election, including outlining each department’s responsibilities.
- R2. By December 1, 2014, the Department of Planning & Public Works, in coordination with County Counsel and the Clerk of the Board, shall develop guidelines for the preparation of a Proposition 218 Public Notice. The notice shall include all legally required information and the following:
 - An explanation of the “protest” election process;
 - How a resident can participate in the protest election;
 - How the protests are counted and what constitutes a successful protest;
 - How relevant information can be obtained; and
 - How disabled and non-English speaking residents can participate.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors shall consider including a protest form in the public notice to be completed and returned by a protesting resident for all future Proposition 218 actions.
- R4. By October 1, 2014 the Board of Supervisors shall identify the appropriate department to maintain and make accessible Proposition 218 election records, consistent with the maintenance of other utility rate, election and financial records.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following individuals:

- County Administrative Officer: Recommendations R1 and R4
- Director of Planning and Public Works: Recommendation R2

INVITED RESPONSES

- Board of Supervisors: Recommendations R3 and R4

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

DISCLAIMER

This report is issued by the 2013-14 Yolo County Grand Jury with the exception of two jurors who were recused from the interviews and investigations.