

**MEDIA RELEASE FOR FEATURES USE
HUMBOLDT BAY MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT**

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IT'S ALL ABOUT FLOW

Public meetings about water set for next week

They are town hall meetings with a twist.

No interruptions, boos or police escorts.

No standing at a dais and hurling opinions at a decision maker. No pre-conceived solutions, either.

Starting next week, Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District seeks to enhance public conversation while engaging the community in a 9-month conversation about the challenges swirling around the county's most precious resource: water.

Protecting Humboldt County water rights, improving the Mad River watershed and controlling water rates are the focus of discussion at meetings scheduled Tuesday, Oct. 13 at Azalea Hall in McKinleyville; Wednesday, Oct. 14 at the D Street Neighborhood Center in Arcata; and Thursday, Oct. 22 at the Wharfinger Building in Eureka.

Meetings start at 6 p.m. and feature an overview of the water district's history and current situation. Discussion of impacts, community values and proposed evaluation criteria will follow.

"We'll be prepared for 100 people at every meeting, but we don't really have any idea how many will come," said Kaitlin Sopoci-Belknap, president of the Board of Director for HBMWD.

HBMWD delivers drinking water to approximately 80,000 people in Arcata, Blue Lake and Eureka and the community service districts of Fieldbrook-Glendale, Humboldt, Manila and McKinleyville.

The district is faced with a shrunken customer base from the closure of the pulp mills, tens of millions of dollars in infrastructure needs in the next 20 years, and the threat of losing the water it does not put to beneficial use.

The first step to involve the community in the planning process began last month when approximately 30 stakeholders from real estate, organized labor, business, the Chamber of Commerce, economic development, fisheries and watershed management, environment, and the Blue Lake Rancheria joined with 20 randomly selected citizens to learn about the issues facing the district and suggest evaluation criteria.

HBMWD general manager Carol Rische called the first meeting of the Citizen Study Group an "overwhelming success."

The format and guidelines designed by Trinidad's Mary Gelinis received wide praise, Sopoci-Belknap said, and are being adapted for the upcoming meetings.

Among the Gelinis guidelines: listen as if your life depended on it, speak to what matters, share air time, let people finish their thoughts, and encourage everyone to participate.

As for format, rather than stand at a dais to formally address a seated board and audience, participants will rotate in small discussion groups of four to five.

"When I sit in a group of four, my tendency is to listen and not yell," Gelinis said. "I am much less inclined to interrupt or call you a name."

Gelinis is the managing director of Gelinis James, Inc. with 20 years of experience directing operations in behavioral research and development and consulting with those who desire collaborative approaches to complex, comprehensive change. She is also a co-founder of the Cascadia Center for Leadership.

Working with HBMWD personnel, she hopes to get diverse groups of people to work with one another, learn to listen, and build agreement among about how the district must proceed without two shuttered pulp mills. Those two mills used four to five times the water daily as the rest of the district combined and paid the lion's share of infrastructure costs in bringing water from Ruth Lake.

"I was going to public meetings, looking at audiences of smart, capable, caring people whose wisdom and experience were not being tapped by the process," she recalled. "We are pitting people one against the other in ways that are unnecessary. If people feel good about the process they've experienced, that they've been heard and had an impact, the public process could be transformed."

Common Sense California agreed. Last month, it awarded one of six \$7,500 grants to HBMWD to support the public engagement effort known as FLOW – Frank Language about Our Water.

"I am skeptical of national/Federal level civic engagement because of the complexities in policy-making at that level," Common Sense California Executive Director Pete Peterson said. "We see civic engagement as an infrequently used, but important civic leadership skill, and as budgets tighten and land use issues become inscrutable, we see involving the public as a pragmatic response – especially at the local level – to difficult times."

Members of the Citizen Study Group appreciated Gelinis' design for meaningful public conversation.

"I've been part of a lot of public processes. This one's different," said Dave Varshock, a member of the government relations committee for the Humboldt Association of Realtors.

Kahani Skydance, a randomly selected citizen, agreed.

"It's not political. It's consultation; not confrontation," she said.

"A lot of people are wary about engaging in things," said Bill Thorington, President of the Humboldt Watershed Council. "This was positive and it gives people hope."

A Water Resource Planning Advisory Committee headed by HBMWD directors Sopoci-Belknap and Bruce Rupp is distilling the key themes from the Citizen Study Group to create a basis for broader discussion next week. Additional opportunities for input will follow.

“We want people involved now, but we realize that some may plug in later,” Sopoci-Belknap said.

The Citizen Study Group assures continuity throughout the year, but HBMWD is hoping to entice some more than the “usual suspects” to participate throughout all three phases of public forums.

“Things develop politically because we don’t start at the grass roots to think about the issues before they get big,” Skydance said. “This is an opportunity – a viable and caring way of working out our issues.”

Tonya Marseille, another randomly-selected citizen, jumped at the chance to participate. She’s a Eureka native who left, then returned to see “what rivers other than the Mad River had become. They’re mud puddles. I couldn’t believe it.”

She’s terrified for the future, especially after hearing that state law requires the county to put water to beneficial use or lose it.

“That was horrifying to me. I really don’t know if people knew or understood that in the water bag discussion a few years ago.”

That water bag discussion involved a request by a private entrepreneur to ship water out of Humboldt County in bags. With HBMWD using a fraction of its permitted amount and California in a third year of drought, HBMWD officials realize ‘just say no’ may not be an option.

“I’m excited,” Sopoci-Belknap said of the process ahead. As the executive director of Democracy Unlimited, she’s no stranger to political battles. She’s also seen the toll it’s taken on everyone’s willingness to get involved.

“I’ve been to some meetings where even when you win, you feel dejected,” she said. “We need to solve the problem of our dysfunctional community discourse.”

To learn more about the flow of water, rates, and ideas, go to www.hbmwd.com. Scroll near the bottom of the page and click on Water Resources Planning.

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Captions for Pictures

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Citizen Study Group participants rotated three times through small table groups to identify criteria, the values behind those criteria and make recommendations for the criteria to be used as the community tackles the challenges surrounding water rights and water rates. Common Sense California tagged the process as an “inside-out approach” that engages the public in finding options. Submitted photo/Carol Harrison

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Kaitlin Sopoci-Belknap, left, is the chairperson of the water district board and one of two board members on the Water Resources Planning Advisory Board, which is coordinating a public engagement model based on civility and a flow of criteria, values and ideas back-and-forth between elected leaders and the citizens they represent. “Water is so fundamental,” she said. “We’re hoping this can bring everyone together and lead to a new kind of community discourse.” Submitted photo/Carol Harrison