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Community Voices: It's not too late. Bakersfield can invest in sewer infrastructure without overburdening ratepayers.

By PHILIP PETERS and RIKO MENDEZ

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The county of Kern and SEIU Local 521 agree that the sewer rate increases adopted by the city of Bakersfield in May are unfair, excessive and illegal. Both organizations have taken legal action to block the increase, but agree that a better course would be to meet with the city now rather than spend years — and hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars — in court. Together, we can develop a fairer approach that keeps sewer rates affordable while investing in reliable sewer infrastructure.

Our organizations do not always take the same position on every issue. On this issue, however, we agree: The sewer rate increases are unconstitutional, and our position is in the best interests of all community residents.

The facts are straightforward. The city of Bakersfield's 2026-2030 Sewer Rates and Fees Report makes clear that nearly half of the 254% rate increase imposed on current users will not benefit them. Instead, those funds will finance a massive expansion of Plant 3, as well as new storm sewers and trunk lines in southwest Bakersfield, primarily to serve high-end residential developments and industries that have not yet been built.

To be clear, the county of Kern and SEIU Local 521 support investing in Bakersfield's sewer infrastructure. That is not at issue. City sewer workers represented by SEIU 521, who keep our wastewater system running, know this firsthand: Investment in these facilities is necessary to meet the needs of a growing Bakersfield and protect the services on which residents and businesses depend.

The issue is the unfair and illegal manner in which current residents are being forced to pay for investment that will disproportionately benefit future users. That is wrong, particularly when mechanisms, such as charging appropriate connection fees to new users, are available to ensure that these costs are allocated fairly. Growth should pay for growth.

The city has indicated that it plans to oppose SEIU 521's application to intervene in the county's lawsuit, potentially resulting in two lawsuits instead of one. That raises a simple question: Are additional lawsuits and legal costs really in taxpayers' best interests, or would the people of Bakersfield be better served by good-faith discussions among community leaders?

The city should come to the table with the county and the union representing thousands of households affected by the increased fees.

It's not too late. Let's sit down together, explore alternatives and develop a funding plan that protects our infrastructure while treating Bakersfield residents fairly.

We know from experience that issues of this magnitude cannot be resolved without good faith dialogue, and that is what we are calling for today. We urge the city to build on its commitment to fiscal stewardship by avoiding unnecessary litigation costs and meeting with the county of Kern and SEIU Local 521 to pursue a fair, negotiated solution that serves the public interest.

The best outcomes are achieved through honesty, collaboration and meaningful engagement with the community and those most impacted, not in the courtroom.

Want to learn more about the county's lawsuit? Visit KernCounty.com.

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