

Valley Voices: Apple Valley water takeover plan: Know the full cost

By: Greg Raven

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In August, the Town of Apple Valley released its inaugural "Transparency Report" to inform the public about the money they have spent and are planning to spend on efforts to acquire Apple Valley Ranchos Water Company. I count myself among the Apple Valley residents who appreciate the gesture, but question why the Town's feet had to be held to the fire before they agreed to public disclosure, and why the "Transparency Report" had so many errors, omissions and irrelevant information.

Here are a few of the questions about the town's \$3.2 million takeover budget that remain unanswered, and remain a real stumbling block to legitimate transparency:

First, where did this \$3.2 million come from? For a town that has seen a recent uptick in crime, it is important to know what is not being paid due to the town's attempt at acquiring a private water company. Considering the poor maintenance of our storm drains ahead of what is promised to be an El Nino rain year, residents need to know the specifics.

Second, why are costs for the takeover spread out over several different departments, instead of rating its own line item within the city manager's department? The fact that \$3.2 million is figuratively being "scrounged" gives the appearance that acquisition costs are purposely being hidden, especially when there isn't a single line item in the adopted budget for 2015-16 that refers to acquisition efforts.

Third, we were told initially that starting in August the town would publish a "Transparency Report" monthly, but by September residents were left on their own to discover that instead it is going to be issued quarterly. How are residents supposed to monitor this process with a quarterly report schedule?

In April of this year, the auditor and treasurer of the state of Ohio pitched a plan to put the checkbooks of cities, counties, villages, townships and schools online to restore Ohioans' faith in government. The City of Victorville recently made news when it contracted with OpenGov to share documents with the public. This substantive action was made all the more admirable by how little fanfare surrounded the announcement.

The City of Victorville is reported to have spent \$8,000 to have its new OpenGov system go live. If the Town of Apple Valley invested in a system that didn't fall prey to decisions over which documents were posted and which were not, it could save hundreds of thousands of dollars of staff and attorney time on public records requests, based on the August "Transparency Report."

As it is, all the Town's official documents related to a proposed acquisition, from Environmental Impact Report to other official notices, are hosted on the Town's propaganda website, instead of its official website. This arrangement gives rise to reservations about the sincerity of the Town's "transparency" efforts, as these — and only these — public records are bathed in political spin crafted by expensive PR consultants.

All we're asking is that the Town of Apple Valley provides some straight answers to those of us who question the wisdom of spending hundreds of millions of dollars acquiring Apple Valley Ranchos Water Company.

— Greg Raven is co-chair of Apple Valley Citizens for Government Accountability, and is concerned about quality-of-life issues.

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