



Petitions spur suspicions

Possible forgeries cloud a vote on SMUD annexation

By Ed Fletcher -- Bee Staff Writer

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Elections officials suspect "some instances of fraudulent signatures" in the petitions filed to force a June vote among SMUD customers on whether the public-power utility should expand into Yolo County.

The suspicious signatures, among the 53,317 filed, were discovered during a routine verification process in Sacramento County, which includes a random check of 3 percent of the signatures turned in.

Of the 1,600 signatures randomly checked, 32.2 percent were invalid, officials said. If that validity rate (67.8 percent) is applied to the total number of signatures turned in, the result is too close to the 31,395 signatures needed to order the election. Now, election officials will have to examine every signature, as required by state law, said Alice Jarboe, Sacramento County's assistant registrar.

The call for a June vote was triggered by opponents of the Sacramento Municipal Utility District's proposal to annex 77,000 Pacific Gas and Electric Co. customers living in Davis, West Sacramento, Woodland and adjacent unincorporated areas.

Yolo County voters will head to the polls in November to decide the annexation issue.

But the opposition group, which is backed by PG&E, asked for a vote in June for current ratepayers, who live in Sacramento and Placer counties.

SMUD later agreed that its current customers in Sacramento and Placer counties also should vote on the issue in November, regardless of whether the June vote proceeds.

SMUD officials said the prospect of fraudulent signatures was a serious issue.

"Anytime you are talking about a violation of the law ... it's a huge issue and there needs to be an investigation," said SMUD attorney Arlen Orchard. "I think the responsibility has to lie with PG&E. They hired the people to do (the signature gathering)."

PG&E spokeswoman Jann Taber said the company holds itself to the "highest ethical standards," but referred questions to the coalition behind the signature drive.

"The campaign is absolutely in agreement that, if there is any indication of fraud, it should be investigated by the appropriate authorities," said Jeff Raimundo of the Coalition for Reliable and Affordable Electricity.

He said the questionable signatures are likely a case of problems with individual signature gatherers, rather than a conspiracy to commit fraud.

Michael Arno, whose company Arno Political Consultants, handled the signature-gathering effort, said shady signature gatherers should be prosecuted.

"Almost all petitions have some forgeries," said Arno, whose firm was paid about \$1.50 per signature gathered. More than 100 gatherers were used in the effort. The signatures were filed last month.

"When you have done a few petitions you can see things that look suspicious," said Jarboe, the elections official, who declined to elaborate.

Even if some phony signatures are thrown out, Raimundo said the coalition has enough signatures to trigger the election.

"This is going to qualify to get on the ballot," Raimundo said.

But Jarboe said it's too close to call at this point. "If it continues to be in this 30 percent range it's going to be cutting it close for it to qualify," Jarboe said.

The signatures have to be verified by March 10. To meet that deadline the staff will have to work overtime, Jarboe said.

SMUD has agreed to pay for the extra staff hours. Raimundo said the coalition also has offered to pick up the tab.

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