Getting Involved in Your Local Water Board: An Overview

In the southern San Joaquin Valley, hundreds of thousands of residents cannot turn on their tap and drink a glass of clean water. In this region, 565 local water board members hold the power to ensure that residents receive safe and affordable water. But right now, nearly five hundred board members hold uncontested seats. Realizing local water boards’ potential depends on community members who are informed about the boards’ roles, interested in getting involved, and understand how to make a difference.

What is a local water board?
In hundreds of unincorporated communities, residents are served water by public, resident-led local water boards. These boards, named special districts, are the most local type of local government. Like school districts, special districts are created to meet specific local needs that the state government or city, county, and other types of local government have not met. In the southern San Joaquin Valley, 15 different types of special districts are responsible for water management, from Community Services Districts to Public Utility Districts, Irrigation Districts, and more.¹

What role do local water boards play?
Of the 142 local water boards in the southern San Joaquin Valley, 75 provide drinking water to residents, while 67 deliver non-drinking water to farms, dairies, and other entities. In communities, boards’ primary responsibility is to ensure that all residents are served water that meets state and federal drinking water standards. Board members can:

• Plan, fund, and oversee projects to secure safe drinking water (e.g. drill a new well, replace outdated infrastructure, install a water treatment plant)
• Set fair water rates
• Participate in regional planning to ensure long-term sustainability

While some boards exclusively hold powers that relate to water, board members’ roles frequently extend far beyond water management. For instance, in many communities board members can secure funding to pave roads, build community parks, establish public transportation routes, and make other community investments that powerfully shape health, safety, and well-being.

Most fundamentally, local water boards offer an opportunity for residents’ voices to be heard. In many communities, these boards are the only public, local government accountable to, and led by, residents themselves. Like city councilmembers or mayors, board members are community leaders. Local water boards offer an opportunity to take action — and to make a difference in your community.

¹ In Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties, there are 15 types of special districts that each hold distinct roles and responsibilities that relate to water management: Community Services Districts, County Water Districts, Drainage Districts, Irrigation Districts, Joint Powers Authorities, Municipal Utility Districts, Municipal Water Districts, Public Utility Districts, Resource Conservation Districts, Resource Districts, Sanitary Districts, Storm Water Districts, Water Agencies, Water Conservation Districts, Water Districts, and Water Storage Districts.
Why is it important to get involved?

A new report from Community Water Center, titled “Untapped Opportunity: Local Water Boards and the Fight for Water Justice,” points to a reality: there are simply not enough residents running for local water board seats in the southern San Joaquin Valley. In Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties, 87% of local water board seats studied were uncontested in the most recent election (Figure 1). When only one candidate runs for a seat, the election does not take place. In the four counties, 75 of 109 local water boards had not held a single election in the last four years (Figure 2).

Further, according to forthcoming research from the California Civic Engagement Project, fewer than 15% of these local water board members are Latino. Of 242 non-drinking water board members studied, none are Latina.²

A full board of engaged, collaborative, and committed board members is crucial to meet boards’ potential — to hold the technical, managerial, and financial capacity to secure grants and oversee projects, to participate in regional planning, and to effectively work with, listen to, and advocate for the communities they represent.

How can I get involved?

Any community member holds the power — and the responsibility — to be involved, informed, and engaged with their local water board. Community members who understand the role their board play, who attend meetings, and who vote, or encourage others to vote, are vital to building an effective and accountable board.³

Ultimately, accountability — and the opportunity for robust community representation — relies on the residents who choose to run for a seat themselves. On most boards, any resident or registered voter in the district is eligible to run for a seat on the board. If you have questions about the election process, or if you’d like to learn more about how to run, reach out to your board, your county elections office, or to CWC. We’re here to help, with resources and a network of water board members, the Community Water Leaders Network, that shares advice and expertise, resources in monthly newsletters, briefing calls, and in-person roundtables. Ultimately, change depends on community members who decide to step into their power — and make their voices heard.

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3 Local water boards typically hold monthly meetings, and they are required to share meeting times and locations with the public at least 72 hours before the meeting takes place. If you have trouble finding meeting times or getting in touch with your board, call CWC.