

With an eye toward water: NID, SYRCL discuss meetings on video



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The Nevada Irrigation District now video records, live-streams and archives its board meetings, which are available for viewing on the district's website — a move that some customers say allows for broader public participation.

"No longer does a disability, conflict with work or school, or lack of transportation preclude engagement and education in the stewardship of the most vital shared resource," said the South Yuba River Citizens League in a news release.

According to the release, SYRCL, the League of Women Voters of Western Nevada County and the Federation of Neighborhood Associations led a 14-month campaign requesting access to more information about NID's executive decisions, which pushed the district towards adopting video recording technology.

Dozens of district customers spoke up during recent board meetings, pleading with the NID directors to video record their sessions, which some said is the new standard for government agencies. Directors initially struck down those requests, citing concerns over the cost of the video technology as reason to maintain an audio-only recording method.

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— NID Director John Drew

NID Director John Drew, who told customers in March it wasn't his responsibility to "facilitate and finance the creation of a vicarious relationship with the public," told The Union he was glad the district was able to appeal to its customers' requests with a cost-effective video recording solution.

The district's video technology was set up by staff and was far less expensive than technologies proposed by third-party companies, he said. But Drew doesn't agree with the argument that video recording board meetings increases the district's transparency. He said the district has always been transparent.

"The way (the request for video recording) was framed initially was to increase transparency," he said. "It was my position that a board or a council is either transparent or it's not. The thing that the video allows is a higher degree of visibility so that people can see what's going on. It doesn't really change our transparency one way or another."

But Drew said he was in favor of the decision to install cameras.

"I'm glad we did it, and we did it very economically," he said.

Director William Morebeck said he's "happy (NID is) affirming our commitment to keeping the community informed."

Morebeck hopes the new technology doesn't discourage customers from attending board meetings in person, which he said often sparks "robust dialogue."

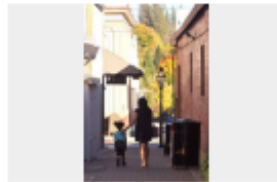
He said video recording likely helps the perception of transparency, but, as far as he's concerned, the district didn't have any issues with transparency to begin with.

"I always give answers," Morebeck said. "The public is always welcome to talk to me — I'm available to speak with anyone."

Melinda Booth, SYRCL's executive director, said the amount of public involvement in the video-recording discussion is "telling of the times we are living in."

"This community is hungry for information, watching, speaking up and powerfully engaged," she said.

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