

By Rebecca Unger
Hi-Desert Star

JOHNSON VALLEY — When does digging a well on private property cause a ruckus? When it's Johnson Valley versus the Bighorn-Desert View Water Agency.

Last year the Johnson Valley Improvement Association got into trouble with the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health for serving the community's popular Saturday breakfasts from a kitchen using hauled water.

Digging a well and installing the pumps and pipes for the community center could cost thousands of dollars, something the membership of mostly retired folks couldn't afford.

An appeal to county 3rd

District Supervisor Neil Derry got things moving with a promise of \$55,000 in Community Development Block Grant money for an "emergency" project. Then county Special Districts got involved, and somewhere in there Bighorn-Desert View and Johnson Valley clashed.

"The JVIA gets emails from Bighorn's general manager saying that our board isn't doing things right," Betty Munson, president of Johnson Valley Improvement Association, said. "I keep hearing that they're trying to stop this."

During public comment at Tuesday night's special meeting of the Bighorn board of directors, Johnson Valley's Court Prittie complained that agency General Manager Marina West was not helping with the well, but instead was

going behind the association's back and causing a negative attitude where the well was concerned.

"My perception is that we're all for that well," answered director Dave Larson. "The only stipulation we want is an agreement that would limit Johnson Valley from becoming a special district and a water seller. There are a few issues there that are valid issues."

Prittie assured the director that becoming a special district water seller was not part of the plan.

"The only things we want it for is the community center and the fire department next door," Prittie said.

The Johnson Valley resident had his say and left before West delivered her general manager comments at the

end of the meeting.

"If anything, it would appear that the JVIA chose not to involve the agency. My services were offered but were not accepted by the majority of the JVIA board," West told the directors. "To say that I went behind their back is not a true statement. To say that nothing was done to help is also false, because I did offer hydro-geological help so they would not hit a dry well. I offered financial assistance so the agency could also garner information from this location."

According to Munson, water records for the area go back to the 1970s, including reports from water witchers. The bulk hauling station at Well 10 is also nearby.

"The water here is cleaner than the state water, which is full of cars and dead bodies,"



West



Larson

Munson said. "This is just Bighorn trying to take our water."

West blamed the rumor mills for churning out misinformation.

"What we're dealing with is folks not being careful enough with accusations," West said. "They're hearing things from the public and believing those things, without coming forth and getting their own information. I believe that the JVIA has every right to have its own well to serve its needs, but because of all the secrecy and lack of transparency at the county level about where these funds are coming from, where they're going and what their purpose is, it's been very difficult to get a straight answer out of the supervisor's office. Therefore we've been cautious the entire time and have reason to believe there is something more to this."

Jim Oravets, division man-

ager of engineering at San Bernardino County Special Districts, said the project is going out to bid as a domestic water well for the improvement association.

"All the water is to be used on the property," Oravets explained. "They cannot sell water from it, cannot start a special district in the Lucerne Valley model."

The request for proposal will also include additional alternative bid items to include connecting the adjacent County Fire Station 43 if there's any money left for it.

Station 43 is used by first responder John Jones to house his vehicle and equipment. County Fire pays the JVIA a yearly lease of \$1.

The station was built by the association and was maintained by the membership until 10 years ago. It has a tank that's been filled by hauled water from County Fire.