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## Regional water authority a possibility

**By Rob O'Dell**

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Water will become the central issue for the City Council in February, starting with Tuesday's council meeting.

The council will get an update from City Manager Mike Hein on negotiations with Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry to set up a study to look at all aspects of a comprehensive regional water plan, and potentially a regional water authority. The council is scheduled to take a final vote on the study Feb. 20.

Increasing water fees is also on Tuesday's agenda, as the council will consider taking the first steps toward raising the amounts of some miscellaneous water fees such as the system equity fee and a fee to acquire Central Arizona Project water for new connections to the system.

But later this month comes the main event: deciding how much it should raise water fees on users.

Tucson Water said in January that water rates should go up 10 percent, starting in summer.

But seeing the potential political backlash of a 10 percent increase on ratepayers, Hein ordered Tucson Water to shave the increase to 8 percent.

That 8 percent increase was unanimously approved by the Citizens' Water Advisory Committee last month, and Hein said the council seems to be generally supportive of the 8 percent increase.

Tucson Water had an increase of 5 percent this year built into its budget to pay for an expansion of its underground storage facility in Avra Valley. But slow water sales and a lack of new construction activity had Tucson Water calling for a 10 percent increase.

Councilwoman Nina Trasoff said an "8 percent increase is reasonable and necessary to secure our water future."

Trasoff said the council can't allow the brunt of rate increases to fall on regular ratepayers who are so good at conserving water. "I don't want them penalized because of that." Still, she added, an 8 percent increase is "appropriate and necessary."

Councilwoman Regina Romero said ratepayers must be protected as well, particularly low-income ratepayers. But she added, "I'm much happier with 8 percent over 10 percent."

Councilwoman Karin Uhlich said she needed more information before signing off on an increase of 8 percent systemwide.

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