



PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sweetwater Authority Governing Board and essential employees display dedication to service, community during COVID-19 crisis

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In the midst of an unprecedented crisis, Sweetwater Authority (Authority) Board Members and employees have focused all efforts on accomplishing three key goals: provide safe, reliable water; do our part to protect customers from financial impacts of the pandemic; and care for the community we serve.

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As an essential industry, the Authority has continued to provide safe, reliable water service throughout the COVID-19 emergency. Now, the Authority's Governing Board has focused in on how to lessen financial impacts on customers.

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"We knew we had to balance the ability of our agency to operate efficiently with the cost of providing clean, safe water to our ratepayers – many of whom face income reductions or job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Steve Castaneda, Board Chair.

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At its meeting on May 13, the Board approved several cost-saving measures, including a proposal by employees to temporarily halt contract negotiations, thereby waiving their annual cost of living adjustment. "Through good-faith negotiations with our three employee groups, we have achieved an agreement to extend existing labor agreements for one year without increases to employee pay or benefits," said Castaneda.

General Manager:
Tish Berge

The Board also approved a Five-year Financial Plan, which includes an approach that would effectively freeze water rates for Authority customers through the end of next year.

Assistant General Manager:
Jennifer Sabine

Governing Board:
Steve Castaneda, Chair
Hector Martinez, Vice Chair
Josie Calderon-Scott
Jerry Cano
José F. Cerda
Jose Preciado
Alejandra Sotelo-Solis

"Through these and other measures, we can assure our customers that water rates will not increase through the end of 2021 – providing stability in the cost of this essential public service," said Castaneda. "I'm proud of the Board for carefully considering and approving a smart course of action to keep our agency financially strong without increasing water bills."

As the Board worked to protect customers and the agency against financial impacts, Authority employees worked to keep water flowing and to care for the community.

"Our employees are essential workers, committed to showing up to serve even in the middle of a crisis," said Tish Berge, Authority General Manager. "Employees also care deeply for the community we serve, and wanted to find a way to help others beyond ensuring safe, reliable water service."

Last month, Authority employees launched a voluntary giving campaign to support Community Through Hope, a local nonprofit distributing food to those most in need in the South Bay. In the first few weeks of the campaign, employees raised nearly \$3,000, providing nutrition for approximately 50 families.

