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This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press on Tuesday, May 22, 2007.

Valley officials angling to snag water funds

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LANCASTER - Millions of dollars in state aid are out there for regional water projects, but whether Antelope Valley will snag a share is still unknown.

If the Valley gets rejected, it's not for lack of trying. Upward of 30 officials from the cities of Palmdale and Lancaster, as well as local water agencies, gathered Wednesday morning to hear about the second round of disbursements of money made available through Proposition 50.

Passed by California voters in November 2002, Proposition 50 authorized \$3.4 billion in general obligation bonds to fund specific water and wetland projects, including \$380 million for so-called "integrated regional water management plans."

The Antelope Valley integrated regional water management plan's list of priorities - actions to begin within two years - include recharging groundwater, flood control work and riparian habitat restoration in the Amargosa Creek near 25th Street West; the regional recycled water project's second phase and implementation of a comprehensive water conservation-efficient water use program.

Last week's meeting at the Lancaster Public Library was the 13th stakeholder meeting for the Antelope Valley integrated regional water management plan.

T.J. Kim, an associate civil engineer with Los Angeles County Waterworks District 40, told the group they have until Thursday to submit written comments to the California Department of Water Resources or the State Water Quality Control Board regarding revised guidelines for the funding.

"We recommended that the state reduce the maximum grant amount of \$25 million per region to \$15 million," Kim said. "We believe that would help disperse the funds more equitably, benefitting more regions."

State agencies earmarked \$64.5 million for the second round of water management plan funding: \$43 million for Southern California and \$21 million for Northern California.

If the state maintains the current \$25 million maximum, it's possible that only two regions would share in the Southern California allotment, officials said..

But, Kim said, "there are three regions competing" for that money - Santa Barbara, San Diego and the Antelope Valley.

That means the Antelope Valley could get nothing unless the entire Valley presents a unified front to the state agencies.

In that same vein, Melinda Barrett, public relations manager for L.A. County Waterworks Districts, said she has been concentrating on public outreach to get more support from the various factions that comprise the Antelope Valley, especially those considered somewhat disadvantaged. Representatives from the water plan's public outreach committee attended a meeting of the Association of Rural Town Councils.

"We will be going to Littlerock and Roosevelt and Juniper Hills," she said. "We will need to do some outreach within Palmdale and Lancaster. What we're finding - some of the communities are not necessarily considered disadvantaged." However, even if the \$43 million gets split between Santa Barbara and San Diego, the Antelope Valley stands a chance of qualifying for grant money because it straddles Los Angeles and Kern counties.

"We are in a unique situation," Kim said. "We can apply for both (Northern and Southern) California grants.