DAILY PRESS

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January 31. 2016 12:01AM

Acquisition costs top $1 million

APPLE VALLEY — Since 2011, the town has spent more than $1.1 million on its attempt to acquire the water system currently owned by Liberty Utilities, Apple Valley — formerly Apple Valley Ranchos Water Co. — an amount that is up nearly $481,000 since last August.

Assistant Town Manager Marc Puckett presented the town's most recent transparency report of acquisition- and water-related costs at last week's regular meeting of the Town Council.

A breakdown shows that attorney costs total $627,009 — an increase of more than $256,000 since August— appraisal costs total $127,377, other consultants costs total $104,215, public information costs total $166,269 and other miscellaneous costs total $122,153, according to the transparency report that tracks costs up to Dec. 31, 2015.

Attorney costs make up more than half of the total cost of acquisition to date, the report showed.

Puckett said the total estimated cost of acquisition stands at $3.5 million, which is up from the estimated $3.2 million reported in August.

During his presentation, Puckett also noted that the town has spent $231,000 researching 73 public records requests and provided over 237,000 documents in response to those requests — a notable dollar amount given that a small number of people have made a majority of the requests, according to Puckett.

The town's most recent disclosure of money spent on public records requests comes amid a lawsuit filed last May by Apple Valley resident Leane Lee.

Lee previously told the Daily Press she's suing the town to enforce her right to receive documents she requested last April related to the Hayward Consulting Group, True North Research Inc. and the 20/20 Network — all of which the town has utilized during its acquisition attempt.

Lee believes the town's legal expenses have significantly exceeded the budgeted amount and alleges that the town is attempting to conceal the amount spent on legal services by transferring funds from one account to another in order to obscure the nature of the expenditures.

A status conference hearing for that case is scheduled for March 9 in San Bernardino, court records show.

The $231,000 that went to public records requests is part of a total $828,052 the town has spent on water-related issues not directly related to acquisition. That amount includes legal expenses paid for "fighting" various moves made by Liberty Utilities, Apple Valley, including the acquisition of Yermo's water system, according to Puckett.

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