



# The Sacramento Bee



Opinion

## Has Sacramento really hated water meters for 100 years?



*By Tom Philp*

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Clinton Leong, 92, of Sacramento, peered into an alley behind his T Street home the other day to watch a city crew busy at work. He was about to be an important footnote in Sacramento's water history, one of the last Sacramentans to be forced by California to have his water use measured.

Sacramento's opposition to the metering of water is one of the policy cornerstones of the city. Voters in 1920 went so far as to cement the prohibition of residential water measurement into Sacramento's city charter. But as the 20th Century was coming to a close, an emerging conservation ethic was isolating a Sacramento without water limits. The city fought back against meters, but eventually, it was forced into measurement in 2004.

Sacramento's opposition to water meters appears to have been a political stunt for a single election that hung around for decades.



Mathew Harrington, who works for the City of Sacramento Department of Utilities, installs a water meter earlier this month at one of the last city homes without one. Hector Amezcua hamezcua@sacbee.com

Ever since a [1916 review](#) on the subject, city managers have consistently embraced the measurement of water.

It has only been those pesky elected officials, fearful of voters and local media led by a certain daily newspaper, who have carried the torch against measuring water use.

Yet in California, local control only goes so far. A state law can trump a city charter. Eventually, the state legislature would mandate water meters everywhere. And for Sacramento, that meant a fully metered city, with [more than 143,000 devices](#) installed over two decades. With the last meters now being installed, the final chapter of this political saga is down to its final strokes of the pen.



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## Sacramento's water meter ban is a fluke of history

On that fateful city ballot in 1920 that [banned the residential water meter](#), there was also a bond measure to build the [city's first water filtration plant](#).

This was no coincidence.

Ten years prior, voters had [narrowly rejected](#) a proposal to build the same water facility. A decade later, a city sick from unsafe water desperately needed safe water.

Frank C. Miller, the city's engineer in 1916, knew that water meters would make great sense. "Meters unquestionably represent the only permanent and continuously acting

means of prevention of leakage and waste by and through consumers' water using devices," he wrote in his city report.

But public safety was the priority. Sacramento's unfiltered water was causing typhoid fever outbreaks. So when the city made another attempt in 1920 for a voter-approved water filtration plant, it added a dose of popular public policy. Sacramento proposed to add to the city charter these sacred words:

"No water meters shall ever be attached to residential water service pipes..."

Voila. Sacramentans approved the new city charter and that much-needed treatment plant, to be located on the Sacramento River north of what was then the Southern Pacific railroad tracks. The facility distributes safe water to this day.

Ponder this: Had just 176 more Sacramentans voted to build this water treatment plant in 1910, would the city have cared about water meters in this city charter revision a decade later? A handful of votes in a single election profoundly shaped a century of city water history.

## **Why the water meter ban became untouchable**

Water managers would continue to grouse about Sacramento lacking meters, and blame the media. "The press in Sacramento City was unalterably opposed to meters," wrote Sacramento City Manager Edwin A. Fairbairn in 1977. "They may have changed their minds lately, I don't know."

The media most certainly had not. No local institution was more opposed to the measurement of water than The Sacramento Bee.

When talk of mandating water meters reached Congress in 1990, The Bee lashed back. "Any water savings that result from such a mandate, however, wouldn't come close to justifying the hundreds of millions of dollars it would cost to retrofit all those houses," wrote The Bee's editorial board.

In plotting his strategy to mandate water meters, long-time activist Ron Stork of Friends of the River began to divide California into two broad categories — those against water meters that read a Bee in Sacramento, Modesto or Fresno, and those in the rest of the state. "The pressure was building up within the non-Bee areas (of the state) about the embarrassment of having no meter retrofit requirements," he said.

The push for water meter mandates began In 1991. [Senate Bill 229](#) by Daniel Boatright of Concord would require all cities to install residential meters with new construction. But Sacramento got the concession it needed. SB 229 would not require anyone to actually read the meter.





A water meter waits to be installed by workers with the City of Sacramento Department of Utilities earlier this month. After a 20-year effort, almost every home in the city has a meter. Hector Amezcua hamezcua@sacbee.com

## How the California water meter mandate came to pass

Most legislators by 2003 represented communities with water meters. The political math to mandating them must have looked achievable to Assemblymember Christine Kehoe of San Diego. But she overlooked one formidable obstacle — Sacramento’s Darrell Steinberg, chairman of the powerful Assembly Appropriations Committee, a gateway for policy legislation.

Steinberg used his power to force Kehoe to abandon the statewide water mandate. With the bill no longer applying to Sacramento, Steinberg [jumped on board](#).

Kehoe, however, would return the very next year with essentially [the very same statewide bill](#). Steinberg, no longer chair of appropriations, could do nothing other than meekly vote no amid a tiny opposition.

“I should have voted for the damn bill,” Steinberg, now our former mayor of eight years, texted recently. And in context, this was for Steinberg a rare parochial water moment. He would later pass [historic water conservation mandates](#) over the howls of many local water managers.

Even The Bee by 2004 had abandoned Steinberg and the crusade against water meters. “Stewardship has to start at home,” wrote The Bee on Oct. 1, 2004. “Water meters,

decades from now, will be a given in Sacramento life, and not the political taboo that spawned this legislation.”

Who wrote the words that reversed decades of opposition to water meters by The Bee? A junior member of The Bee Editorial named Tom Philp.

### **“Everyone needs one”**

Standing in an alley on T Street, I marveled at how this skilled city crew installed one of the final city water meters in a little over two hours into Sacramento’s loamy soil. I decided to approach this 92-year-old Clinton Leong, the curious homeowner.

Leong is the perfect ending to this Sacramento water story.



Homeowner Clinton Leong, 92, observes Ryan Whitwell, with the Sacramento Department of Utilities, as he helps install one of the last water meters in the city earlier this month. Hector Amezcua hamezcua@sacbee.com

He happens to have lived through most of Sacramento’s water meter drama. Coming here in 1951 from Canton, China, Clinton Leong had managed to live in Sacramento for 73-plus years without a water meter.

He is nearly deaf. He knows nothing about the water meter politics. Leong has no idea that Sacramento has gone from using 280 gallons per person a day in 2008 to about a [quarter that less](#) than a decade later.

Leong never worried that water meters would kill the city’s beautiful trees, which the meters have not.

Leong knew all along what Sacramento should do.

“Everyone needs one,” Leong said of the water meter. “I don’t mind.”



*Tom Philp is a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial writer and columnist who returned to The Sacramento Bee in 2023 after working in government for 16 years. Philp had previously written for The Bee from 1991 to 2007. He is a native Californian and a graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.*

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