420 Sierra College Drive, Suite 140
Grass Valley, CA 95945-5091
Main: (530) 432-7357
FAX: (530) 432-7356

EXHIBIT 8-A

COLANTUONO
HIGHSMITH
WHATLEY, PC

Michael G. Colantuono
(530) 432-7359
MColantuono@chwlaw.us

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Dave Stoldt, General Manager, Monterey Peninsula Water Management District	FILE NO:	43025.0005
FROM:	Michael G. Colantuono, Esq. Ryan Thomas Dunn, Esq.	DATE:	March 16, 2016
CC:	David C. Laredo, Esq. Heidi Quinn, Esq. David J. Ruderman, Esq.		
RE:	Legal Opinion — MPWMD User Fee		

SUMMARY

As you asked, we write to opine on four issues you identified in your February 18th email regarding the District's authority to assess an 8.325 percent user fee on retail water bills ("User Fee").

Issue 1: Because the 7.125 percent portion of the User Fee predates 1996's Proposition 218, and because the District has not increased it and instead has always expected Cal-Am to pay it, requiring Cal-Am to resume its collection would not require a Proposition 218 protest hearing because doing so is not "imposing" or "increasing" the fee. However, Cal-Am's ability to comply with the District's ordinance compelling it to raise the fee is impaired by the remaining litigation following the Supreme Court's remand in *Monterey Peninsula Water Management Dist. v. Public Utilities Com*. (2016) 62 Cal.4th 693.

Issue 2: When the District stopped receiving the User Fee from Cal-Am, it also stopped receiving the 1.2 percent component, but it did not repeal that portion. As such,

reinstituting it would not be increasing or imposing it. As is true of Issue 1 above, we conclude no new protest hearing is required.

Issue 3: The District has the authority to use the revenues from the 7.125 percent portion of the User Fee for any District purpose. The District is limited to using revenues from the 1.2 percent component for water supply projects, but it may also use these revenues for any project benefiting water users if its Board passes a resolution to do so.

Issue 4: The District can waive collection of a portion of the User Fee, in whole or part, without waiving its right to collect the entire User Fee at a later date, and it need not submit the User Fee to the voters before again beginning collection. We recommend it do so by a resolution suspending all or part of the fee that states a sunset date on the resolution. Thus, when the rate returns to its higher, previous level, no legislation action makes it so – the expiration of a temporary reduction does. Such temporary reductions can be renewed from year to year until the District requires additional revenue.

FACTS

Our opinions rest on the facts stated here. If these facts are incorrect or materially incomplete, please let us know as different facts may require us to alter our advice to you. We understand the list of ordinances in the "MPWMD User Fee History" chart provided for our review include every District Ordinance pertinent to the user fee. These are Ordinances 10, 12, 29, 32, 36, 37, 41, 51, 55, 58, 61, 67, 78, 82, 123, and 138.

We have also considered District Resolution No. 2011-09, dated May 27, 2011, which directed Cal-Am to continue to collect and remit the User Fee at a rate of 8.325 percent of charges to its customers, and we assume the facts stated in that Resolution are correct. We also understand Cal-Am last paid any portion of the user fee in June 2011, but that the District did not formally suspend Cal-Am's duty to collect the user fee or otherwise alter that duty since the District adopted Resolution 2011-09.

ANALYSIS

Issue 1. Voter approval is required to "impose or increase" property related fees, including fees for ongoing water service through an existing connection such as the user fees at issue here. (Cal. Const., art. XIII D, § 6, subd. (a); *Bighorn-Desert View Water Agency v. Verjil* (2006) 39 Cal.4th 205.) Neither Proposition 218 nor the Proposition 218

Omnibus Implementation Act of 1997 ("Omnibus Act") defines "impose," but the Court of Appeal has interpreted it to mean the initial enactment of a fee or charge. (*Citizens Ass'n of Sunset Beach v. Orange County LAFCO* (2012) 209 Cal.App.4th 1182, 1194 ["The word 'impose' usually refers to the first enactment of a tax[.]"].) Given that the District first enacted the 7.125 percent component in 1983 and gave it its current form in 1992, it has taken no action to "impose" the fee since the 1996 adoption of Proposition 218 and the fee does not yet trigger a duty to comply with that measure.

The Omnibus Act defines "increase" for purposes of Proposition 218 as a change in a fee that "[r]evises the methodology by which the tax, assessment, fee or charge is calculated, if that revision results in an increased amount being levied on any person or parcel." (Gov. Code, § 53750, subd. (h)(1)(B).) A levy is not increased for purposes of Proposition 218 if it "[i]mplements or collects a previously approved tax, or fee or charge so long as the rate is not increased beyond the level previously approved by the agency, and the methodology previously approved the agency is not revised so as to result in an increase[.]" (*Id*. at subd. (h)(2)(B).)

On the facts recited above, we conclude the District has not "increased" the fee since the July 1, 1997 effective date stated by Proposition 218's article XIII D, section 6, subdivision (d). In a Los Angeles case, the City imposed a utility users tax on both the call detail portion of cell phone bills and on minimum monthly charges. Carriers objected, claiming to lack technology to identify calls that originated or destinated in Los Angeles necessary to trigger its taxing authority under the Commerce Clause of the federal constitution as interpreted in *Goldberg v. Sweet* (1989) 488 U.S. 252. The City agreed by letter that carriers might tax only base monthly charges until technology to track the origin and destination of calls became available. Then Congress adopted the Mobile Telecommunications Sourcing Act of 2000 ("MTSA") to provide that a cellular call was presumed to originate or destinate in the city to which the carrier addressed bills for cellular service. The city then wrote carriers, directing them to commence collection of the tax on the entirety of cell phone bills. The carriers, refused and sued for declaratory relief that the City's new direction constituted a tax "increase" requiring voter approval under Proposition 218. The Court of Appeal agreed with the carriers, concluding the letters to carriers evidenced an "administrative methodology" to calculate the tax within the meaning of Government Code section 53750, subdivision (h)'s definition of "increase" and the City had changed that methodology by its post-MTSA letter. (*AB Cellular LA, LLC v. City of Los Angeles* (2007) 150 Cal.App.4th 747, 756–

757, 761–763.) Thus, even though Los Angeles never amended its utility users tax ordinance, it had established an administrative methodology that could not be changed without voter approval.

Here, we understand that there have been no changes relevant to the District's collection of, or methodology in calculating, the 7.125 percent component of the User Fee since Ordinance 67 in 1992. Cal-Am ceased complying with the District's ordinance under the force of an order of the California Public Utilities Commission, and the District promptly litigated the issue. The facts set out above identify no action of the District which can be characterized as acquiescing in the PUC's position or establishing a methodology to reduce or suspend the fee.

Moreover, *AB Cellular* recognized the District could choose to end or reduce collection for any reason without losing the right to begin collection of the full amount at a later date: "[A] local taxing entity can enforce less of a local tax than is due under a voter-approved methodology, or a grandfathered methodology, and later enforce the full amount of the local tax due under that methodology without transgressing Proposition 218." (*AB Cellular*, *supra*, 150 Cal.App.4th at p. 763.)

Accordingly, we conclude that Cal-Am's renewed collection of the User Fee does not "impose" or "increase" the User Fee so as to trigger Proposition 218 bur rather fits squarely within Government Code, section 53750, subdivision (h)(2)(B)'s exception to the definition of "increase" for collection of a "previously approved tax, fee, or charge" without change in its rate or the administrative methodology for calculating it. As such, no protest hearing is required.

Issue 2. The District adopted Ordinance 138 in 2008 to reaffirm the 1.2 percent component of the User Fee in compliance with Proposition 218. That ordinance explains that affected property owners were given opportunity to protest the 1.2 percent component pursuant to Proposition 218 and the Board found that majority protest occurred. (Ord. 138, p. 4 at ¶ 23.) Because we understand the District has not established an administrative methodology to reduce or eliminate the fee, it can collect it without new Proposition 218 compliance for the reasons stated under Issue 1 above.

Issue 3: 7.125 percent component. The proceeds of a property related fee may only be used for the purposes for which the fee was imposed. (Cal. Const., art. XIII D, § 6, subd. (b)(2).) However, the District has authority to interpret the ordinances which

establish its revenues and courts will give some deference to a reasonable construction. (E.g. *Sacks v. City of Oakland* (2010) 190 Cal.App.4th 1070, 1082 [review of city's expenditures of special parcel tax "limited to an inquiry into whether the action was arbitrary, capricious or entirely lacking in evidentiary support"].) A court would then apply standards of statutory interpretation to the ordinances, first looking at the language at issue, then the intent of the language. (*Ibid*.)

In addition, The District must construe the purpose of the fee in light of its statutory power and to defend the fee as a fee for services rendered by the District and not purely discretionary revenue, as taxes are. (Cf. Cal. Const., art. XIII C, § 1, subd. (e)(2) [exemption to Prop. 26's definition of "tax" for service fees]; *id*. at art. XIII A, § 4 [Prop. 13's two-thirds voter approval requirement for special taxes]; Gov. Code, § 50076 [defining "special tax" under Prop. 13 to exclude "any fee which does not exceed the reasonable cost of providing the service or regulatory activity for which the fee is charged and which is not levied for general revenue purposes"].)

Ordinance 55, enacted in May 1991, restructured the user fee. This ordinance authorized "immediate collection of a user fee in the aggregate amount of 6.824 percent of Cal-Am bills, replacing prior fees which amounted to 8.125 percent of that bill." (Ord. 55, § 2.) Thus, Ordinance 55 "replac[ed]" earlier user fee ordinances, making them irrelevant to analysis of allowable uses of the fee. Ordinance 55's recitals mention a need to "implement the mitigation measures under the five year plan to ease environmental impacts caused by water production" (*id*. at p. 3, ¶ 11) but do not otherwise limit the District's use of the fee. Similarly, Ordinance 55 refers to fees "to fund mandatory water rationing." That ordinance relabeled and decreased the "water rationing user fee" to "a water conservation user fee of 2.11 percent" of Cal-Am bills. (*Id*. at p. 2, ¶ 10.) Ordinance 55 does not otherwise explain the intended purposes of this "water conservation user fee" or identify specific limitations on its use.

In September 1991, the District enacted Ordinance 58, authorizing "a user fee in the aggregate amount of 8.125 percent" and "replacing prior fees authorized by Ordinance 55 which amounted to 6.824 percent" of customer bills. (Ord. 58, § 2.) Ordinance 58 states the fee's purpose "to fund mandated District water supply activities, including the five year mitigation program and the water conservation/rationing program caused by the water supply emergency" (*id*. at § 1) but does not more precisely limit use of the revenues. Thus, the District has the discretion to

use these funds as deems fit to accomplish the fee's purpose to fund water supply activities, including conservation, rationing and other similar efforts.

In July 1992, the District enacted Ordinance 61, to "amend the user fee established by Ordinance No. 58" to delete a surcharge to fund rationing. (Ord. 61, p. 1, ¶ 6.) Ordinance 61 refers to the "2.11 percent user fee established by Ordinance No. 55 to fund water conservation activities" and reduces it from 2.11 to 1.11 percent. (*Id*. at § 6.) The District adopted this 7.125 percent aggregate fee, "replacing prior fees," meaning the District could construe it as a completely new ordinance. (*Ibid*.) Again, there are no express limitations on the use of the revenues derived from the 7.125 percent fee in Ordinance 61, and thus the District has the power to use the revenues for the purpose for which the fee was imposed, again, water conservation.

Ordinance 67, enacted in December 1992, states an intent to "reallocate the existing user fee established by Ordinance No. 55 and modified by Ordinance No. 61, so as to increase user fee revenue available for the Five Year Mitigation Program." (Ord. 67, p. 1, ¶ 1.) A recital assumes the 1.11 percent fee discussed in Ordinance 61 was "exclusively dedicated to conservation activities." (*Id*. at p. 1, ¶ 2.) The same recital states the District could use the 1.11 percent fee "for District programs relating to conservation, rationing, irrigation, erosion control, mitigation, and/or water augmentation expenses, provided that all such expenses shall be required to confer benefit and or service to existing water users." (*Id*. at p. 1, ¶ 2.)

Ordinance 67's third section refers to the "aggregate user fee," understood to be "the present 7.125 percent user fee." (Ord. 67, § 2.) It reads in full:

> Section Three: User Fee Reallocation
>
> A. This ordinance shall modify the accounting and allocation of the aggregate user fee presently collected to fund water conservation programs of the District, and instead **allow the use, allocation and accounting of that same fee to District programs relating to conservation, rationing, irrigation, erosion control, mitigation, water planning, and/or water augmentation program expenses, provided that all such expenses must be [sic] confer benefit and/or service to existing water users**. This ordinance shall cause neither a reduction nor an increase in fees, but shall instead modify the means by which use of those fees are monitored and allocated.

> B. The amount of revenue reallocated shall be equal to 1.11 percent collected on the Cal-Am water bill as established by the District in Ordinance No. 55 and modified by Ordinance No. 61 in July 1992.
>
> C. This ordinance shall republish the authorization to collect user fees in the same manner and amounts as previously authorized by ordinance. This fee shall not be exclusively dedicated to a single activity or program, but instead **may be allocated at the discretion of the Board provided that all such expenses shall confer benefit and/or service to existing water users**. **These services may include, but shall not be limited to conservation, rationing, irrigation, erosion control, mitigation, water supply planning, and water augmentation program expenses**. **Unincumbered [sic] fee revenue in any single year may be placed in the capital project sinking fund and may later be used to fund expenses associated with planning for, acquiring and/or reserving augmented water supply capacity (including engineering, hydrologic, legal, geologic, fishery, appraisal, financial, and property acquisition endeavors)**.
>
> D. A similar reallocation shall be made to user fees collected from other district water distribution systems of fifty (50) connections or more.

Thus, Ordinance 67 assumes that the 1.11 percent portion of the user fee discussed in Ordinances 55 and 61 is limited to funding "water conservation programs." (Ord. 67, § 3, ¶ A.) It "reallocates" that 1.11 percent to be used as is the rest of the 7.125 percent fee. (*Id*. at § 3, ¶ C.) Ordinance 67 defines the purposes for which the fee may be used quite broadly and "allow[s]" the Board "discretion" to allocate the fee as it sees fit, as long as there is a "benefit and/or service to existing water users." (*Ibid*.) Finding 4 states Ordinance 67 was required "to permit continuation of mandated and essential District programs." (Id. at p. 1, ¶ 4.)

It bears noting that Ordinance 78, enacted in 1995 to finance the New Los Padres Dam, states the user fee was "established to fund costs of water conservation, and programs to ameliorate environmental impacts caused by water production." (Ord. 78, § 5). Ordinance 78 was repealed by 1996's Ordinance 82 when the voters rejected the dam proposal (Ord. 82, § 1), and Ordinance 82's findings state that the user fees in place on the date of Ordinance 78's approval "shall remain in force and be unaffected" because the measure failed. (*Id*. at p. 1, ¶ 5).

In sum, the District may use revenues from the 7.125 percent component of the fee to provide a benefit or service to water users due to the very broad language of Ordinance 78.

Issue 3: 1.2 percent component. The 1.2 percent component enacted by Ordinance 123 and affirmed in Ordinance 128 specifies what the proceeds of this component may fund. Ordinance 123's second section states the proceeds of the fee "shall fund District water supply activities, including Phase 1 of its Aquifer Storage & Recover (ASR) effort." Thus, the District must use these funds for water supply programs and services. (E.g., *Common Cause v. Board of Supervisors* (1989) 49 Cal.3d 432, 443 ["'shall' is ordinarily construed as mandatory"].)

Ordinance 123's Section Two also states the fee "may also be allocated, by resolution at the discretion of the District Board of Directors, provided that all such expenses shall confer benefit and/or service to existing Cal-Am … water users." (Ord. 123, § 2.) It provides an exemplary list of such services — "conservation, rationing, irrigation, erosion control, mitigation, water supply planning, and water augmentation program expenses" (*ibid*.) — but states services which may be funded "shall not be limited to" those specified. It also states unexpended fee revenue "may" be placed in a reserve for later use for water supply capacity projects. (*Ibid*.) Thus, the District has discretion to use the 1.2 percent revenues for any "water supply activity" activity but may also, by resolution, fund any lawful District program or service that benefits the water users who pay the fee.

Ordinance 138, enacted in 2008 (after the effective date of Proposition 218), states the District "shall use" the 1.2 percent fee "to fund ASR costs" (Ord. 138, p. 3, ¶ 15) and the fee "may not be used for any other purpose or to fund general governmental activities." (*Id*. at p. 3, ¶ 18.) It further states fee proceeds "shall fund District water supply activities, including capital acquisition and operational costs for present and future ASR purposes" including Phase 1 of the ASR and subsequent ASR activities. (*Id*. at § 2.) Ordinance 138 uses the same language as Ordinance 123 allowing the Board to approve, by resolution, the use of the fee for other purposes that benefit water users. (*Ibid*.)

Ordinance 138 does not state a sunset date, but does state that the District cannot collect the 1.2 percent fee if revenues "exceed funds required to maintain plant, equipment, facilities, supplies, personnel and reasonable reserves necessary to provide

water service." (Ord. 138, § 5.) This section also requires the Board to hold an annual hearing to review fee expenditures and requires the fee to sunset "unless the Board determines that the purpose of the fee is still required, and the amount of the fee is still appropriate." (*Ibid*.) The Board must also reduce the fee if "the amounts needed to fund that purpose are decreased." (*Ibid*.)

Thus, the District may use proceeds of the 1.2 percent component for "water supply activities" as it reasonably defines that term, including but not limited to ASR purposes. The District also has the power, by resolution, to use the proceeds of the 1.2 percent component for any other project benefiting water users.

Issue 4. *AB Cellular*, discussed above, expressly considered the authority of an agency to collect less than the approved amount of a tax, fee, or charge: "[A] local taxing entity can enforce less of a local tax than is due under a voter-approved methodology, or a grandfathered methodology, and later enforce the full amount of the local tax due under that methodology without transgressing Proposition 218." (*AB Cellular*, *supra*, 150 Cal.App.4th at p. 763.) Thus, because the District has established a total user fee in the amount of 8.325 percent consistently with Proposition 218, it may collect that entire amount, part of that amount, or none of that amount if the funds are not needed.

Notwithstanding the unqualified language of *AB Cellular*, we recommend the District reduce the fee by a resolution which includes a sunset date. In this way, the District can increase the fee without an action of its Board that can be characterized as an "increase" within the meaning of Government Code, section 53750, subdivision (h). The sunset date can be extended as necessary until the District determines more funds are needed, in which case the suspension or reduction resolution can be allowed to lapse, triggering Cal-Am's duty to collect the fee at the higher rate.

Conclusion

The District need not comply with Proposition 218 to resume collection of the user fee once the PUC litigation allows Cal-Am to do so. The ordinance history of the fee allows the District fairly wide discretion it the use of fee proceeds provided those uses provide benefit to the water users who pay the fee.

Thank you for the opportunity to assist. If we can provide further advice or assistance, contact Michael at (530) 432-7359 or MColantuono@chwlaw.us or Ryan at (213) 542-5717 or RDunn@chwlaw.us.