



# PARTNERS

## **Pasadena's Role in the Formation Of The Metropolitan Water District Of Southern California**

By Timothy F. Brick

*The cooperation of thirteen visionary cities laid the basis for Southern California's water system more than seventy years ago. Let's go back to the 1920s to examine the role that one city – Pasadena – played in shaping the history of our region.*

### **A Regional Cooperative**

"It's socialism," the Senator growled, "a usurpation of the prerogatives of business." Pasadena City Attorney James H. Howard did not back away from the charge. He calmly replied: "It's no more socialistic than any of the numerous water district, irrigation district, sanitation district and public utility district acts which are already on the statute books of the state."

The bill being considered by the 1925 Senate hearing in Sacramento was the Metropolitan Water District Act, breakthrough legislation that would authorize the formation of a new governmental entity to bring the water of the Colorado River to the coastal plain of Southern California. James Howard, who drafted the bill, was but one of several Pasadenans who played a key role in the formation of the Metropolitan Water District and in ensuring Southern California's water needs to this day.

### **Going Dry**

By the early 20s water had become a critical problem for most Southern California cities. Pasadena was particularly hard-hit and aggressive in its pursuit of new supplies. Until then stream flows from the San Gabriel Mountains and several wells had met local needs. But now the water level in the underground Raymond Basin beneath the city was falling 10 feet a year. When the Copelin well was drilled during the drought of 1899, it found water at 154 feet. By 1924 the level had fallen to 190 feet; by 1929 it was at 240 feet. Local pumping was draining the Raymond Basin by 10,000 acre feet each year.

Back in 1905 Pasadena voters had approved the acquisition of lands at Whittier Narrows on the San Gabriel River, but no water development occurred there due to threats of litigation. In 1912 the city consolidated three private water companies into the municipal water department. Eventually Pasadena purchased ten local water companies and initiated a spreading program in the Arroyo Seco. Still the water table continued to recede. Pasadena water chief Samuel B. Morris led the search for prospective sources like Lake Arrowhead and the West Fork of the Mojave River. These too were abandoned due to legal concerns. Morris' engineers investigated a reservoir site in the Chevy Chase district of Glendale for waters from Sespe Creek in Ventura County and studied dam locations at the mouth of the Arroyo Seco, in Eaton Canyon and in Tujunga Canyon to capture floodwaters.

Then in 1922 Pasadena filed for the all floodwaters in San Gabriel Canyon flowing into the Pacific Ocean. Despite opposition from Long Beach and other cities, Pasadena officials were determined to secure a reliable water supply for the next 25 years.

Other Southland cities did not have such options.

### **The Annexation Era**

Ten years before Los Angeles had temporarily solved its water needs by piping in water from the Owens Valley in the Eastern Sierra Nevadas. The new water gave Los Angeles five times its previous supply, but surrounding communities could only share the water wealth if they agreed to be annexed. Surplus Owens Valley water was first used to irrigate new fields in the San Fernando Valley. Then, from 1913 to 1927, the burgeoning metropolis gobbled a series of small cities and unincorporated areas up. Venice, Eagle Rock, Watts and other communities lost their separate civic structure and identity. William Mulholland, the engineer of the Owens Valley aqueduct, was also the architect of the annexation policy, designed to make Los Angeles the greatest city on the Pacific Coast. He foresaw Los Angeles expanding to cover the entire county south of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Faced with a severe drought in the early twenties, Los Angeles' neighbors nevertheless were determined to maintain their own civic identities. The search for water became the key to survival.

MWD's *History and First Annual Report* summed up the situation: "With present sources being overdrawn continually, it was clear that a new importation to meet the needs not only of Los Angeles but of the entire Southern California metropolitan area must be made. The only new source found available was the Colorado River."

For twenty years farmers in the Imperial Valley had been using its waters for irrigation. Now the Colorado came to be viewed as the source for urban areas on the coast. "The Colorado River aqueduct," the report declared, "was therefore planned not as a Los Angeles project, but as a Southern California enterprise, not on the basis of meeting immediate needs alone, but on the far broader basis of insuring for generations to come an adequate water supply for the region as a whole."

It was a dynamic alliance of civic leaders from Pasadena and Los Angeles who had the vision and tenacity to make the dream work.

### **Mulholland Looks East**

For several years Los Angeles had been monitoring the early discussions about damming the Colorado River for irrigation and flood control at Boulder Canyon because of the electricity the dam would provide. In the midst of the

severe drought in 1923, William Mulholland, chief engineer of the Los Angeles Water Bureau, turned his attention to the water supply potential of the project. In late October he set out on a survey to investigate the feasibility of an aqueduct from the river 300 miles away to the coast. Mulholland's ten-day survey, dubbed a "brush-clearing expedition," scouted 150 miles of river and terrain in rowboats and Model T's to determine the most practical route for an aqueduct.

Mulholland envisioned an immense project, including not only a massive aqueduct but also Boulder Dam with electric generators to provide inexpensive power to pump the water. In the mid- and late-20s the battle for these two interrelated projects was fought at every level of government all the way to Washington DC, with Pasadena providing a great deal of the leadership. The consequences of that epochal battle can be seen not only in the formation of the MWD and Boulder (Hoover) Dam but also in the other grand projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Bonneville Power Authority that such big dreams made possible.

By 1923 Mulholland was no longer invincible. A bond issue in 1921 for water facilities had been defeated and a \$35 million Boulder Dam bond election in 1923 was narrowly defeated. Farmers in the Owens Valley were blowing up the aqueduct and a tremendous anti-Los Angeles backlash had set in. State bonding requirement capped LA's ability to finance projects of the scale of the Colorado River project.

Faced with outright insurrection in the Owens Valley and the prospect of an enormous expense to develop the aqueduct, Mulholland and other Los Angeles officials dropped the idea of a county-wide city. They realized they needed the aid of surrounding communities. Those cities needed the wealth and power of Los Angeles. It was a historic partnership born of vision and necessity.

Three problems confronted the visionaries: the cities were not contiguous, they lay in four different counties, and the smaller cities needed safeguards to protect them from Los Angeles' enormous wealth and power. The solution they devised was the creation of a special district authorized by state legislation, a metropolitan water district.

### **Pasadena Takes Leadership**

Pasadena, highly motivated by its water quest and civic pride, decided to pursue both the San Gabriel Canyon Dam and the MWD. In the June municipal election of 1924, Pasadena voters authorized \$1 million to initiate what would become Morris Dam. Simultaneously Pasadena civic leaders set out to rally the support of other Southern California cities behind the Colorado River aqueduct and the new district that would build it.

On September 17, 1924, William J. Carr, a former State Senator and Pasadena city attorney, called a meeting in Pasadena to discuss the potential of the Colorado River supply for Southern California cities. That June Los Angeles had filed for a flow of 1,500 cubic feet per second of water from the Colorado River. Now representatives of thirty eight communities formed the Colorado River Aqueduct Association to promote: "...the construction of the aqueduct which will bring to this Southland the much needed waters of the Colorado River."

H. W. Wadsworth, Chairman of the Pasadena Board of City Directors, was elected president of the new group. Wadsworth, who was a retired paint store owner and a trustee of the California Institute of Technology, headed that organization during the critical incubation stage of the Metropolitan Water District and was known the "Father of the MWD."

Pasadena City Attorney James H. Howard, a protégé of Senator Carr, was chosen as a trustee of the Colorado River Aqueduct Association. Howard provided yeoman service for the Legal Committee. Together with William Mathews, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power attorney, Howard drafted the MWD Act. Mathews became the first MWD General Counsel. Howard succeeded him and served in that post from 1932 to 1957.

### **The MWD Act**

The bill, first introduced in the legislature in January 1925, had a rocky start. This was a period of lively debate about the appropriate role of government in the development of natural resources and utilities. On the one hand,

"public power" advocates, consisting of a loose coalition of progressives, civic reformers, socialists, and far-sighted business leaders believed that these basic services would be better provided by public enterprises because of the dangers of monopoly power and profits unchecked by market competition. Private utilities, oil companies, and some conservatives felt that this was an unwarranted intrusion of government. Their goal was to "put business in government and get government out of business." The MWD bill particularly tore apart the Republican Party. It was a model of civic action of the sort espoused by Progressives like Hiram Johnson and John Randolph Haynes, but the conservative wing viewed it as a dangerous socialistic experiment.

Pasadenans, in general, enthusiastically backed the public approach to meeting utility needs. In 1905, the city had established a municipal light and power department that directly competed against investor-owned Edison. Then in 1912 the city formed the municipal water department. City Manager Cornelius Wellington Koerner, who served the city for almost forty years started in the Light & Power Department. He was active in the Public Power League that defined Los Angeles municipal politics in this era and was known nationally as a champion of public power.

### **Sacramento Standoff**

The conservative legislators in Sacramento, encouraged by Edison and Pacific Gas & Electric, blasted the MWD bill. They held that the proposal was too broad and loosely defined. They decried the danger of "reposing unusual power with the officials that will be in charge of the raising and expenditure of the millions of dollars authorized by the act."

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Pasadenans W J. Carr, Water Department chief Samuel B. Morris, and City Board (Council) Chairman Hiram Wadsworth all traveled with City Attorney Howard to Sacramento to fight for the proposal. Howard rose to its defense. "With the possible exception of Los Angeles, the project is too large for any one city," he stated. "It has never been suggested that the water be brought here by private enterprise, and, so far as I am informed, the project does not conflict with any private interest. The logical thing to do is to organize the cities into a district capable of constructing the necessary works and wholesaling the water for distribution by the privately or publicly owned plants serving the respective municipalities."

Howard's eloquence and the needs of Southland cities could not save the bill. It passed the Senate on April 15, 1925 by a vote of 25 to 9 but was defeated a week later in the Assembly 43 to 32. Los Angeles County legislators provided 11 nays and only three ayes, but popular support was so great that those members who opposed the bill were turned out in the next election.

Municipal elections in Los Angeles then became the focus of the debate. The June 2, 1925 ballot included a charter amendment for the consolidation of the Department of Water and Power, a \$2 million bond issue for initial funding of the Colorado River development and a straw vote on the MWD bill. Mayor George C. Cryer made these the focus of his re-election campaign against a well-financed advocate of private development. The voters spoke decisively reelecting Cryer, establishing a consolidated Department of Water & Power and approving the Colorado River bonds. LA voters also backed the MWD bill 7-1.

After the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee endorsed the MWD legislation and a pro-Colorado River development governor was elected in 1926, opposition in Sacramento disappeared. As a mark of Pasadena's contribution to the measure, the only concern expressed at this point was criticism that the act "threatened to centralize the control of the district in the hands of Los Angeles or Pasadena." The Metropolitan Water District Act passed overwhelmingly and was signed by Governor C. C. Young on May 27, 1927.

### **Pasadena Establishes The MWD**

On February 15, 1928, the Pasadena City Board of Directors adopted an ordinance declaring the establishment of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and listing proposed member cities. In order to test the validity of the act immediately, City Clerk Bessie Chamberlain refused to certify the ordinance. On August 3, 1927 James Howard argued the validation case before the California Supreme Court, which ruled the act constitutional.

### **Boulder Dam**

One last hurdle remained. The formation of the MWD was inextricably tied to the development of Boulder Dam. The hydroelectricity from the dam was needed to make the water project feasible, and MWD's backing was needed to pay off the Boulder Dam bonds. During the same period that the MWD debate raged throughout Southern California and in Sacramento, an equally contentious debate over Boulder Dam was focused in Washington DC. And the forces fighting Boulder Dam were the same that fought the MWD.

After three unsuccessful attempts, the House passed the Boulder Canyon Act on May 25, 1928, but then Arizona's senators filibustered for three full days until Congress adjourned. Through the summer a bitter battle was brewing. On August 1 Hiram Johnson, the crusading California Senator who co-sponsored the Boulder Canyon Act with Congressman Philip Swing, came to the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena to launch the campaign against the "power trust." Speaking to the Young Men's Republican Club, he proclaimed: "A lobby greater, more powerful, with more wealth at its command than any that has ever disgraced Washington is at work to defeat the Boulder Dam bill. And not content with its sinister Washington endeavor, it has reached into every state and almost every community poisoning public bodies and every medium of public exposure." When Congress returned in December, the bill was approved by the Senate and signed by President Coolidge on December 21, 1928.

Meanwhile, the Pasadena City Board of Directors called a special election in each of the potential member cities of the MWD on November 6, 1928 to formally establish the agency. The measure passed overwhelmingly in Pasadena and in all but two prospective member cities.



The Founders of the MWD gather at the first meeting of the District's Board of Directors at the Huntington Hotel in Pasadena December 29, 1928: (left to right) Director Harry L. Heffner of San Marino; Director and Vice-Chairman Franklin Thomas of Pasadena; Director Harvey E. Bruce of Burbank; Director A. W. Franzen of Anaheim; Director and Board Chairman W. P. Whitsett of Los Angeles; Director Will O. Harris of San Bernardino; Director and Board Secretary S. H. Finley of Santa Ana; Director W. Turney Fox of Glendale; Director George H. Hutton of Santa Monica; Director Paul Schwab of Beverly Hills; Director C. A. Hutchinson of Colton; Special Counsel James H. Howard of Pasadena; President Hiram W. Wadworth of the Colorado River Aqueduct Association, which sponsored establishment of the Metropolitan Water District; Clayton R. Taylor, Chairman of the Pasadena City Board of Directors.

### **The First Board Meeting**

It was an elated group of representatives of Southland cities that responded to the call of Clayton R. Taylor, Chairman of the Pasadena Board of Directors, for the first meeting of the MWD Board of Directors on December 29, 1928. Buoyed by the passage of the Boulder Canyon Project Act just one week before, delegates from Anaheim, Beverly Hills, Burbank, Colton, Glendale, Los Angeles, Pasadena, San Bernardino, San Marino, and Santa Monica met at the Huntington Hotel, now the Ritz Carlton Huntington Hotel. In the next three years Compton, Fullerton, Long Beach and Torrance joined in, while Colton and San Bernardino withdrew.

When the new board elected officers on February 9, 1929, Pasadena's representative, Franklin Thomas, a former City Director and head of the Department of Civil Engineering at California Institute of Technology, was elected vice-chairman, a post he held for almost two decades. The first board meetings were held at the spectacular new Italian-renaissance City Hall in Pasadena. Operational work began downtown in the offices of the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power.

In 1931, in the midst of the Depression, the election that authorized funding for the Colorado River Aqueduct was

held. The \$220 million bond measure in such a financial climate was immense, representing 11% of the assessed valuation of the region. Throughout Southern California, the measure was approved by a margin of 5 to 1. Pasadenans, who had also approved \$10 million in bonds for Morris Dam in 1929, endorsed the Colorado River project 13 to 1.

### **MWD's Accomplishments**

Since MWD's early days, cooperation and local control have been central to success in meeting Southern California's water needs. Rather than supplant the local operations of water agencies, MWD has provided imported water and water management partnerships to 14 cities and 13 regional water agencies.

MWD original builders, dedicated civic leaders like Carr, Howard, Morris, Koiner, Wadsworth, Thomas and others, did their job well. The MWD they helped form built one of the engineering marvels of our century in the Colorado River Aqueduct. This aqueduct, then the longest in the world, travels through scorching desert, climbs and tunnels through mountains and crosses earthquake faults on its way to the coastal region. MWD tapped Hoover (Boulder) Dam's hydropower and paid for a large part of that facility and of Parker Dam further south on the river.

Hoover was the first federal multiple purpose river control project, but one historian in the late forties noted: "If there had not been a powerful center of population in Southern California, clamoring for water and able to provide an unlimited market for power, it is altogether likely that Boulder Dam would still be in the blueprint stage."

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### **MWD has proven that cooperation and local work work.**

MWD also resolved the dispute over Pasadena's Morris Dam in San Gabriel Canyon. In 1932 MWD agreed to purchase the dam when Colorado River water arrived in Southern California. Pasadena then agreed to yield all claims for San Gabriel River flood water upon transfer of the dam. Pasadena worked closely with MWD during the construction period. For a while MWD considered Morris Dam for the terminal reservoir for the Colorado River water but eventually built Lake Mathews in Riverside County for that purpose.

MWD first delivered Colorado River water to Southern California on June 17, 1941 to Sunset Reservoir in Pasadena. By then virtually all of Southern California's once numerous artesian wells had ceased to flow and thousands of pumps were draining the underground water supply. In Pasadena the wells were down to 350 feet. The 1.2 million acre feet, 1 billion gallons a day, the Colorado River aqueduct provided could not have come at a better time.

Colorado River water sales grew as Southern California did. During the forties and the post-war boom, other areas of southern California were added to the district until the agency incorporated the coastal plain from Oxnard to the Mexican border and served 16 million people.

In the early seventies, MWD became the Southern California conduit for the State Water Project and in the eighties began partnering with member agencies in water reclamation and conservation programs to make Southern California the national leader in water resources management.

### **New Controversies, Old Lessons**

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, MWD is again embroiled in controversy. Utility deregulation and the need for increased competitiveness have provoked a reexamination of MWD and its efficacy. Strife has broken out on the Colorado River again. The themes and the rhetoric are strikingly reminiscent of the 1920s.

MWD's response has been a reaffirmation of the cooperative approach that has served Southern California so well for the last seventy-five years. MWD has proved that cooperation and local control work.

The MWD board and the member agencies have reasserted MWD's role as the key regional water provider for Southern California and developed a flexible integrated resources plan and a rate structure to provide water reliability for the foreseeable future.

Guided by the vision and diligence manifested by Pasadena's early water leaders, we can face the future stronger and better prepared if we renew our commitment to cooperation and water stewardship.

*- December 9, 2003*

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## **The Caltech Connection**

While dozens of Pasadenans worked hard to develop the Metropolitan Water District, the California Institute of Technology played a special role.

Hiram W. Wadsworth, a founding Caltech trustee, graduated from Harvard in 1885 and owned a paint store in New England before venturing west to Pasadena in 1906 where he continued in that line of business.

Franklin Thomas, a native of Iowa, worked for electric utilities, the Bureau of Reclamation and engineering firms before coming to Pasadena in 1913 to develop the Department of Civil Engineering at Throop Polytechnic Institute. Thomas was a key figure in transforming that institution into one of the nation's great technical and scientific institutions, the California Institute of Technology.

When the city manager form of government was adopted in Pasadena in 1921, Thomas and Wadsworth were elected to the first Board of City Directors. Both exemplified the engineering and business prowess sought by the Progressive reformers who championed the city manager form of municipal government. Wadsworth was elected chairman of the board; Thomas was vice-chair and headed the water committee that developed the Colorado River and Morris Dam plans.

In 1924 Wadsworth became president of the Colorado River Aqueduct Association. Through five critical years, he nurtured the development of a new type of cooperative, regional agency and built the political momentum to deliver it. When he completed the birthing task in 1929 with the founding of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, he handed over the reins to his trusted colleague, Franklin Thomas.

Thomas, MWD's first Vice Chairman, served as chairman of the MWD's key technical committee and personally oversaw the engineering details of Colorado River aqueduct construction. The engineering board of review included two other Caltech engineers, R. W. Sorensen and H. S. Mudd. Sorensen built the

electrical engineering department at Caltech for more than two decades, and Harvey S. Mudd was a noted mining engineer. Traveling 240 miles from Lake Havasu on the Colorado River to Lake Mathews in Riverside County, that aqueduct is today recognized as one of the engineering marvels of the 20th century.

Thomas performed another important organizational role, conducting negotiations with communities interested in joining the new district. Thomas, the first chair of the Caltech engineering division, served as vice-chairman of the MWD board until 1947 when Governor Earl Warren appointed him to the Colorado River Board of the State of California. In 1948 he was elected chairman of that board. Thomas served on both boards until his death on August 27, 1952.

Franklin Thomas' obituary in the *Pasadena Star News* measured the import of these two men thus: "Professor Thomas and the late Hiram W. Wadsworth, also of Pasadena, were the fathers of the Metropolitan Water District."

Since then MWD has grown into one of the great engineering organizations in the world, thanks in large part to the early nurturing provided by the California Institute of Technology.

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