

SC council weighs next steps for water supply

Desal opponents urge no more spending on project

Desalination

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SANTA CRUZ — Seawater desalination critics urged the Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday not to finalize a draft environmental analysis of a proposed plant, saying it would demonstrate leaders aren't serious about restarting a public dialogue about water supply.

After 75 minutes of public testimony — most of which opposed the joint desal project with Soquel Creek Water District — council members began weighing City Manager Martín Bernal's recommendation to re-engage the public in understanding supply threats, alternatives and conservation. He also urged council approval for answering more than 400 comments submitted about the environmental impact report for desal, which he stressed won't require the council to certify the analysis or approve the overall project.

"We don't want to prematurely and imprudently take any options of the table," Bernal said. "We have a partner, Soquel Creek, who has paid for at least half of the EIR. If we want to thoroughly look at all the options it's important that we continue the EIR process."

Finalizing the report could take up to 18 months. The city and district have spent a total of \$15 million on desal so far, \$1.7 million of which paid for the EIR. The city's interim water director said addressing questions specific to alternatives could cost about \$300,000 between the two agencies, but the cost of fully completing the report is unknown.

Tuesday's meeting was the first since

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Bernal and Mayor Hilary Bryant called in August for a "reset" in the pursuit of desalination in favor of expanding public input. The move comes as the city negotiates with fisheries regulators on habitat protection, works on a master conservation plan and awaits a county report about water sharing between regional agencies — issues residents said should have been resolved before even considering desal.

Bryant told a standing-room only crowd that "first and foremost, we are hear to listen."

The council did not take a vote by press time, but Councilman Don Lane, a former member of a joint desal task force, informed the council in a letter before the meeting that he would not support finishing the EIR.

"By not proceeding with any new funding commitments for the EIR at this time, we indicate that we are truly in a reset that puts consideration of alternatives on equal footing with consideration of desalination," he wrote.

Bernal said there has been no new water supply since 1975 and the city faces threats from drought and reduced diversions from the North Coast for fish. Economic development goals and anticipated growth also will be impacted by a limited water supply, he said.

Bernal recommended a community committee explore alternatives and their impacts on energy use, neighborhoods and marine life, while taking a close look at demand and conservation. Several community leaders echoed his call to finish the environmental report as a matter of good public process.

"Despite the pressure you will receive tonight to

abandon the work, it makes no sense to have nothing to show for the work we have done all these years," Rick Meyer, Soquel Creek Water District board member, said.

Brent Haddad, an associate dean in the Baskin School of Engineering at UC Santa Cruz and a consultant on the desal project, said, "A lot of us commented on it, and a lot of us want to hear what the responses will be."

But former Mayor Bruce Van Allen of Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives called for ending all spending on desal.

"We should be giving this the same importance as we gave earthquake recovery," Van Allen said. "Perhaps this should be water vision Santa Cruz not water desal Plan B." Former county Supervisor Gary Patton, representative of the Community Water Coalition, said the city for too many years had blindly

followed the lead of Water Department leaders dedicated to desal.

"Put yourself in charge," Patton told the council.

Mary Odegaard, a board member of the Santa Cruz County Sierra Club's executive committee, said, "Now with the 'reset,' there is no need to spend any more money on a draft EIR. The money should be used now to pursue alternatives."

Santa Cruzan Fred Geiger said 73 percent of voters in November 2012 supported Measure P — which requires a popular vote before the city constructs a plant — and those people want to vote.

"You're hiding before your next election," he said. "This is the biggest financial screwup in the history of Santa Cruz."

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