

Council debates

next move on water

Desalination opponents urge end to spending on project

Desalination
by J.M. BROWN

jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — The City Council heard for more than 90 minutes Tuesday night from seawater desalination critics who sought changes to a proposed public engagement to explore other solutions to Santa Cruz's limited water supply.

Almost immediately after city staff published a proposed composition of a new 19-member citizens advisory committee last week, controversy arose over its size and political diversity.

Desal opponents called for the Drought Solutions Citizen Advisory Committee to operate with minimal or no city staff involvement and for its focus to be sustainable water planning not creating solutions specifically for drought. They also urged the council to abandon work on the \$130 million desal project, which staff has said should remain on the table.

Former council candidate Ron Pomerantz echoed calls for an end to spending on desal — close to \$16 million to date between the city and its partner Soquel Creek Water District — to demonstrate a

WATER

Continued from A1

seriousness about studying other options. "How about spending \$16 million on investigating alternatives," he said.

The council did not begin deliberating before press time, but Councilman Don Lane told the Sentinel he expected to propose renaming the panel as the Water Supply Solutions Advisory Committee whose 14 members would be nominated by a council committee and voted on by the council in January.

Lane called for a member each from Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives and the Sustainable Water Coalition that favors desal, as well as a nonresident served by the water system. There would be three seats each for other city residents, environmental representatives and businesses. Two members of the Water Commission would sit on the panel, but no council members as proposed by the City Manager's office.

Rick Longinotti, co-founder of Desal Alterna-

tives, said the public process is not only "a chance to move toward better water security, but we get to heal a rift in our community that was starting to be damaging in a variety of ways. Our work tonight is on the road to rebuilding community trust."

He called for a 10-member committee, with a member each from his group and others critical of desal: the Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation and the Community Water Coalition. There would be members of three business organizations, the Sustainable Water Coalition and two from the public.

Longinotti suggested no members from the Council or city Water Commission, saying they would "risk influencing the scope, direction and extent of the discussion and inquiry that the committee might otherwise undertake." He also requested fish habitat negotiations, regional water transfers and master conservation planning informing the debate be opened to the public.

Matthew Orbach, a UC Santa Cruz graduate, said the council shouldn't let a "small minority" opposed

to desalination derail its efforts to address drought while restoring fish habitat and increasing long-term conservation.

"There are no massive conspiracies ... no one is out to get rich, no one is trying to destroy the environment," he said.

A NEW PLAN

The draft outline for a new engagement plan calls for a committee to lead a yearlong review of the water supply with the help of an independent facilitator. The cost could reach an estimated \$1 million for the facilitator and additional studies the committee could request.

The process would examine solutions ranging from desalination to conservation to improvements in the infrastructure and storage facilities serving the system's 90,000 customers.

After an environmental analysis cemented already growing public opposition to desal, Mayor Hilary Bryant joined City Manager Martin Bernal in calling for a reset. The council approved in October a rough outline by Lane to establish facts about supply and demand

and test a wide range of alternatives for viability, cost and amount of water they would produce.

Assistant City Manager Tina Shull recommended the council decide in early 2014 whether to complete the environmental report on desal, which has already cost \$1.6 million to produce and could cost \$300,000 to answer more than 400 comments from regulators and public.

Former county Supervisor Gary Patton said, "If you decided to proceed and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to complete and EIR on the desal project, there will be no opportunity for the community to believe there is any trust in the exploration of alternatives. You can't do that."

Former five-term Mayor Mike Rotkin, who has spoken strongly in favor of exploring desal, also called for shelving the EIR, saying the public won't buy in to the new engagement process otherwise.

Rotkin was also among those who supported the council's unanimous decision Tuesday to study the loosening of restrictions on recreational use of the San Lorenzo River, the city's largest water source. Although wildlife advocates warned there would be negative impacts of boating on bird and fish habitat, there was a chorus supportive of a new policy.

"We have enough imagination in Santa Cruz, we have enough resources and creativity that we can have that, too," Coastal Watershed Council Executive Director Greg Pipping said of Denver, San Antonio and other cities with urban rivers used for recreation.

"The goal is to find that balance of how do you activate the space and have that opportunity for people without doing harm or damage," Vice Mayor Lynn Robinson said.

Follow Sentinel reporter J.M. Brown at Twitter.com/jmbrown-reports