

City to weigh desalination plunge

By BRIAN SEALS
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Desalination

Members weren't exactly jumping with joy, but the Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday took its first step toward a possible desalination plunge.

**SANTA
CRUZ**

The council agreed to start environmental studies on a desalination plant that would bolster water supplies during drought years.

The council voted unanimously, save for absent members Scott Kennedy and Mike Rotkin, to start a study that is expected to take about 10 months and cost an estimated \$200,000.

While council members and many of the roughly 25 members of the public in attendance had qualms about the potential cost and environmental impacts, the council concluded desalination would be an immediate, emergency solution to an existing problem.

Water commissioners who recommended the plan to the council were even ambivalent.

"This is a lousy solution," said Bill Malone, a water commissioner. "However, it's also the best."

Santa Cruz joins a long list of agencies up and down the California coast looking at ways to convert seawater into drinkable water.

While critics contend a desalination plant would spur growth, the plan's backers say it would produce the bare-bones amount needed to shepherd the city through drought years such as 1977, when residents had to curtail water use. Even supporters said other longer term solutions should be pursued as the city eyes desalination.

"This is not a panacea," Councilman Mark Primack said. "I support this because it is an emergency solution, a stop-gap solution."

Even with the plant, he said, a 1977-type drought would force water users to cut back demand by about 15 percent.

In 1977, customers were forced to cut use by 38 percent, which meant fewer showers, toilets left occasionally unflushed and many brown lawns.

Critics said there are too many variables, like future energy costs, which can account for about 50 percent of the desalination process, and the potential environmental impacts of discharging brine — the excessively salty byproduct of desalination — into the sea.

Critics also said a future council could expand the plant to accommodate growth. "How do you know the next council people will not change this?" questioned Susan Kipping. "Once you make this water available, you're going to be inviting developers to come here."

One speaker, Doug Deitch, suggested a novel, if not politically unrealistic, solution that would involve the Santa Cruz, Soquel Creek and Pajaro Valley water districts.

If 8,000 acres of Pajaro Valley farmland were taken out of production, that would free up water now used for irrigation that could be sold to the two water agencies to the north, Deitch said, citing a 1993 Pajaro Valley water report. As the aquifer is replenished, he said, that land could eventually be brought back into produc-

tion.

Santa Cruz is looking to team up with the Soquel district on the desalination plant project. The district board is set to discuss its needs at an April 29 meeting, said general manager Laura Brown.

The city water department envisions a desalination plant capable of producing 2.5 million gallons per day. Currently, the city consumes an average of 10 million gallons per day. About half the city's water comes from the San Lorenzo River.

It would use an abandoned sewage outfall line to bring water in, and discharge it through a currently used sewage line that stretches two miles out to sea.

Most years, the Soquel district would use the plant to ease demand on its aquifer. In dry years, Santa Cruz would take over operation.

Estimates for the cost of the plant, plus operation and debt, are \$50 million to \$70 million.

Contact Brian Seals at
bseals@santa-cruz.com.