

Council approves rationing budget

Controversial consulting contract postponed

Water Supply

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SANTA CRUZ » The Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved spending \$700,000 through June on a drought-driven water rationing program, but postponed hiring technical consultants for a citizen-led water advisory panel amid public perceptions of a bias toward sea-water desalination.

The council OK'd Water Director Rosemary Menard's request to hire 15 temporary, full-time workers to beef up customer service, public outreach, monitoring and appeals of fines for overuse. Menard anticipates asking for an additional \$330,000 from July to the end of October — which marks the start of the next rainy season — for a total six-month budget of \$1 million.

The money will come from general ratepayer funds, some of which were set aside for administrative projects and studies.

Menard recommended using \$350,000 in a separate account designated for the now-stalled desalination project to hire a Colorado-based consulting firm to perform technical studies for the Water

DROUGHT » PAGE 4

Drought

FROM PAGE 1

Supply Advisory Committee appointed by the council to make recommendations for managing drinking water sources and possibly generating new ones. Menard said she chose Stratus Consulting because the firm had been selected for an economic study last year that was never undertaken.

But anti-desal activists objected because the firm planned to tap several West Coast-based consultants who worked on the desal project.

"It's a blow to the credibility of the process you've entered into with the Water Supply Advisory Committee," former mayor Bruce Allen said. "You want solutions that this community can support."

Engineer Peter Haase

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— Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews

recommended the city instead assemble a group of neutral experts from academic and other institutions rather than hire a firm.

"The advisory committee really needs technical support that is very objective," he said.

Councilmember Hilary Bryant suggested the committee discuss their options during an initial meeting April 30. The council will then decide May 13 whether to hire Stratus or go in another direction, though several council members urged they didn't want to see a lengthy search for a consultant.

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we don't know what's going to lie ahead," Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews said. "I don't think this is something we can just kick down the road and contemplate forever."

Meanwhile, City Manager Martín Bernal said the city has taken steps in its day-to-day operations to conserve.

The Parks Department has cut landscape irrigation, including at the municipally owned DeLaveaga Golf Course, in keeping with a mandated two-thirds reduction in outdoor water use. The city also is minimizing vehicle washing, using recycled water to con-

duct sewer main flushing and not granting new community garden plots, including at a new park in the Lower Ocean neighborhood.

Also, Tuesday the council approved spending \$21,450 to implement several youth programs recommended by a public safety task force. They include funding for a youth crew to work in parks over the summer, a teen internship program at City Hall and a Teen Center outreach program focused on underserved neighborhoods.

The council also approved spending \$85,500 on a code compliance position already budgeted but unfilled. Councilmembers Pamela Comstock and Micah Posner objected because the job partly will support a controversial rental inspection program, which is being reviewed to ensure it isn't contributing to a loss of rental housing.