

Council members question desal deal

Comstock, Posner raise flags over public outreach spending

Desalination
by J.M. BROWN
jmbrown@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved extending the contract of a desalination consultant to complete work on an environmental analysis of the \$125 million water supply proposal.

"I do think at this point we need to be as informational and educational as possible so people can weigh in on this on all sides," Mayor Hilary Bryant said.



POSNER



COMSTOCK

Council members Pamela Comstock and Micah Posner failed to get enough support for dropping a controversial public outreach component from the \$336,000 yearlong contract. Desal opponents, who were behind a successful November ballot initiative guaranteeing a future vote on the seawater desalting project, continued Tuesday to question whether ratepayer funds would be used to advocate for — rather than just educate — about the plan.

"They just won an election, and they are already telling us they don't believe the information is objective," said Posner, who opposes the project.

Comstock said her initial impulse was to vote against the contract because November's vote on Measure P — 72 percent in favor — appeared to show strong community concern. Instead, she suggested revisiting the outreach spending

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— set at \$90,000 — after the long-delayed environmental impact report is published this spring.

"We are this close to getting all the info we need," she said.

In the end, however, Comstock and Posner voted in favor of the extension with Kennedy/Jenks Consultants, a firm the city has already paid \$1.1 million since 2008 for its work on the proposed Westside facility. The contract extension's largest component is assistance with completing the state-mandated environmental study, without which the city attorney said a public vote could not take place.

"To stop spending money would mean we don't have a complete EIR," Councilman Don Lane said. "We don't have enough information the community needs when we get to an election."

Rick Longinotti, founder of Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives, was among several who spoke against the contract, including former Mayor Chris Krohn and outgoing Transportation and Public Works Commission Chairman Ron Pomerantz.

"People don't want their

own dollars to be spent to convince them to support a project they don't feel is necessary or they feel there are alternatives to," Longinotti said. "The EIR will recommend that desal is the preferred option. I don't think any of us expect any outcome other than that."

But Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, who prior to being elected in November had formed a community group supportive of studying desalination, said alternatives will be laid out in the report and noted that Measure P was not an up-or-down vote on desalination.

"These are exactly the kinds of facts and information both the council and the public are entitled to," she said.

Also Tuesday, the council unanimously approved changes in the city's ban on single-use plastic bags, including an automatic increase in the fee retailers must charge consumers for paper bags — to 25 cents from 10 cents — a year after the ordinance goes into effect in April. The changes were made to settle a lawsuit with a group representing bag manufacturers.

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