

City puts brakes on desal project

Top officials recommend not pursuing vote in 2014 to re-engage public

BY J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — The city's top two officials are expected to formally announce Tuesday their recommendation not to pursue a vote in 2014 on a controversial seawater desalination plant and instead work with the public on other avenues for safeguarding a drought-prone water supply.

"We listened and we heard that we are certainly not in agreement, and we recognize the need to re-engage in a community involved process to evaluate our water problem," Mayor Hilary Bryant said Monday. "If nothing else, it's my job and the council's job to listen to the community."

During a 90-day period that ended Aug. 12, regulators and members of the public submitted more than 400 comments on a draft environmental impact report for the proposed facility, many of which question the need for an additional water supply and promote alternatives. That fact, paired with largely negative feedback during public hearings this summer, led officials to conclude the project likely would fail at the ballot box in June or November 2014.

"It's clear there just isn't enough consensus and understanding," City Manager Martín Bernal said in a joint interview with the mayor.

Bernal said he will draft "a community involvement plan" by the end of 2013. Meanwhile, he said ratepayers should not assume desal is dead or that the recommended delay is designed to repackage the plan to be more palatable later.

"We want to be open-minded, and desal is one option," Bernal said. "We were not relying 100 per-



ADAMSON



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DESAL

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cent on desal, including new conservation and even curtailment. It was just what seemed to be a viable alternative."

Bernal's recommendation comes less than two weeks after the city's water director announced his retirement, which the desal proponent said was driven by turning 65 and not about the public tide turning on desal. The move also comes as more citizens are focused on public safety issues including several high-profile cases of violence, discarded drug needles and homelessness.

Bryant said she hoped ratepayers will get engaged in devising water supply solutions. The city has called for water restrictions three times since 2009 due to low rainfall, but customers haven't been asked how much they would be willing to cut back in a severe drought.

"We need to take in all the feedback that we've been getting, and say, 'Here's the problem and what are we

collectively going to do about it?'" Bryant said.

FAR-REACHING IMPACT

The city and Soquel Creek Water District collectively have spent nearly \$15 million studying desalination — including \$1.6 million on the environmental report alone — as a fix to the district's over-pumped aquifers and the city's drought problem, one exacerbated by mandated cutbacks in river and stream diversions for fish habitat. The two agencies serve about 135,000 people combined.

Kim Adamson, general manager of the Soquel Creek district, said Monday, "It's really important the city continue to reach out on this issue with their citizens. We are very much in support of that."

However, Adamson said the district intends to continue pursuing desal and must consider, as alternatives, when to enact 35 percent rationing or a moratorium on new hookups.

The cost of the project has been estimated at \$129 million, a figure that includes spending that dates back to 2005 when the council identified desal as a preferred

water supply fix. Opposition came largely from a few desal watchdogs until May, when the environmental report's identification of possible pump station sites on the Westside galvanized concern.

Forty-year resident Gary Miles, professor emeritus of history and classics at UC Santa Cruz, became a critic after learning a pump station could go in behind his home. He has since raised questions about the true impacts of city growth plans and fish protection on the water supply.

"It would probably be better that they put it away for good," Miles said Monday. "But before we consider this sort of option again, we have to make a really solid good-faith effort to see what we can do with the alternatives."

WHAT'S NEXT

Bernal said the city will complete the environmental report, which involves answering questions from regulators and the public, before recommending the council certify a final draft sometime in 2014. He said it's unclear how much the additional six to 12 months of work by staff or a consultant

will cost, but it will require financial approval from council.

Certification of the report does not mean a project will be pursued. That would require separate action by the council and district board.

In November 2012, 72 percent of Santa Cruz voters passed a citizen-driven measure requiring a popular vote before the city could build the project. The district also has expressed an intent to ask customers to weigh in.

Bryant said pulling the plug on a 2014 vote is not designed to keep desal from being a divisive issue during the November 2014 council race. Bryant and Councilman David Terrazas, a former desal task force member, are eligible for re-election, but neither has signaled their intentions.

"That is the point to me," Bryant said, "that there are so many people willing to talk about this issue and that it is less about the election and more about how we get the community mobilized."

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