

Desalination solution came before understanding problem

Pause in planning has implications for neighboring agency, developers

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — The city's longtime water director acknowledged Tuesday his department focused for years on championing a solution to Santa Cruz's vulnerable water

supply rather than first ensuring ratepayers understood the threat.

After top city leaders called for halting development of a seawater desalination project, Bill Kocher, who will retire in September after 27 years, said state and federal mandates for improved stream flow for fish habitat will reduce water supply 25 percent annually. Even though negotiations are still underway, such cuts will mean steep shortages during the driest years.

"I don't think we've done a good job describing what's to come," Kocher said. "We were so focused on the solution that we didn't get people to understand the gravity of the problem."

Mayor Hilary Bryant and City Manager Martin Bernal issued a joint statement Tuesday calling for the city not to put the desal project before voters in 2014. Instead, they hope the City Council will sup-

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port a forthcoming "community involvement plan" that will fully explore the impacts of future shortages on customers, as well as options for conservation, curtailment or other alternatives to the energy-intensive process of desalting ocean water for drinking water.

City officials said Tuesday a time line has not been created for the plan but said it could take six to 12 months to complete an environmental impact report for certification by the council. That step doesn't mean the project will ever go forward.

The report was designed, in part, to explain the supply problem that led officials to pursue the desal project since 2005. But as Kocher said, perhaps the massive document, which prompted more than 400 comments during a 90-day review period, was not the best mechanism for engaging citizens.

Water officials hosted numerous public meetings in the past several years. But it wasn't until May's publication of the \$1.6 million report that a greater number of ratepayers woke up to the proposal — especially surrounding the question of where to site a pump station on the Westside.

ON THE NET

To read the desalination press release issued Tuesday by Santa Cruz Mayor Hilary Bryant and City Manager Martin Bernal, visit www.santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

MOVING AHEAD

Bryant now envisions a process that could set new conservation targets, evaluate economic impacts of lost supply, explore more regional solutions, and allow citizens and businesses to say what level of cutbacks or fee increases they will tolerate during serious droughts. A moratorium is not as likely given the city's existing plans to allow for modest growth through 2030.

The city was on course to place a desal measure on the November 2014 ballot, but it was clear from the EIR comments — to be released by water officials next month — that public opinion was not behind the proposal.

"You can't let the community make the decision when they don't have all the information," Bryant said.

City officials said costs for carrying out the public outreach plan or completing the EIR aren't known yet. Whatever the costs, they will be added to the nearly \$15 million already spent on the project, which was antic-

ipated to cost \$114 million to build.

Councilman Micah Posner said he hopes fellow city leaders are serious about not presuming desal eventually will be the answer. He said he believes the whole proposal — not just a single characteristic such as pump stations — bothered residents.

"I think the reason the city is backing off is because it wasn't going to win the vote," Posner said. "I appreciate the city is going to hit the pause button, but I want to appreciate the activists who got us to that point."

Rick Longinotti, a founder of Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives, said although City Hall has now acted on demands to rethink desal, his group must use its support base to find solutions. That will include promoting a requirement for developers to directly offset new water use, as well as a long-term plan for transferring water between agencies when feasible.

"We are going to be engaged in that conversation," Longinotti said.

OTHER IMPACTS

The decision to suspend desal will have profound impacts beyond existing Santa Cruz customers.

The city's neighboring water agency and desal partner, Soquel Creek Water District, must now chart a course for dealing with what

many agree is a more pressing problem than the city's occasional, though increasing, drought: saltwater intrusion caused by years of over-pumping groundwater.

"Soquel is in a bad place because they have cast their lot with the city, and now the desal plant is unraveling," Longinotti said.

Thomas LaHue, president of the district's board, said Tuesday his agency won't likely wait long to pursue mandatory rationing, a moratorium on development or water transfers. He agreed that "it would be better to wait than to have a 'no' vote" in Santa Cruz or within his district, but said he hopes the two agencies will now conduct citizen polling on desal, which neither has yet to do.

Meanwhile, a freeze on desal sends a signal to developers, said Jesse Nickell, vice president of Barry Swenson Builder, which has spent \$790,000 on conservation offsets and other fees within the district to earn new water for the company's upcoming Aptos Village mixed-use project.

"It means a moratorium is coming," Nickell said. "It's having us going more toward Carmel (for development.) It's just another barrier just to get something going."

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