

Midcounty water shortage: are planners listening?

By BILL AKERS

If there's one thing people in the midcounty talk a lot about, it's water. Confronted with what looks like a substantial overdraft of the underground water supply, and development pressures only partially abated by Measure J, they're worried.

But while there's a lot of talk about water, the unanswered question is: Who's listening?

At a meeting Monday night of the Soquel Creek County Water District board, directors complained that people — particularly the Santa Cruz County Planning Department — are not listening to them.

Soquel area residents who see their rural ambience threatened by the nearly 500-unit development proposed for the O'Neill Ranch, say the water district is not listening to their expressions of fear that the water supply will run out.

Meanwhile, the city of Santa Cruz and the county planning officials — who figure largely in all this — seem to be listening to no one and continue to go their separate ways.

H.C. Perry, who wants to build the O'Neill Ranch project, thinks everyone should quit worrying and get on with the job of planning and providing water service, for it will all work out in the end.

That is the picture which emerged Monday night during a lengthy discussion by water board members which was triggered by a county Planning Commission hearing on the O'Neill Ranch project.

Director Dan Kriege was more than curious about a Santa Cruz Sentinel report that water district Manager Robert Johnson "refused" to attend that hearing "because the water board didn't want him to..."

"When did we take that action?" Kriege asked.

Board Chairman Ken Izant said he had advised Johnson by telephone not to attend because "it would only be another big argument."

The district's legal counsel, Robert Bosso, also said he advised against Johnson's attending "because there would be nothing new to add" to what had already been said at previous hearings.

But people at the Planning

Commission hearing were upset because they had questions they wanted the district to answer about its ability to supply water to the huge project and to other developments as well.

Director Larry Bargetto is also worried — particularly about what the county planners know or don't know about the water situation. Saying that he had attended hearings on the O'Neill project, Bargetto declared that "there was a lot of information given that was erroneous." He added that he had "concerns about the flow of documents at the Planning Commission level."

A particular document he was concerned about is a letter written Feb. 20 by the district to the Planning Commission describing the overdraft situation, the district's plans to alleviate it, and raising the possibility of a moratorium on new connections if solutions aren't readily arrived at.

The letter concluded by asking the Planning Department "not to require the developer to obtain an agreement for water supply prior to the planning process, but make it a condition of the development prior to construction."

But Monday night, directors said they don't think the Planning Commission members are even aware of the Feb. 20 letter.

It is the Planning Department's requirement that a developer show a proven water supply before he can begin his permit application that is a burr under the water district's saddle blanket.

With Measure J now in force, developers are flooding the county with permit applications so they can get in line for their share. This also means a flood of water service applications — which the water district must grant. And by granting them, they have become the target of "slow-growth" forces who believe the district is encouraging growth.

For over six months, the water directors agonized over the problem, finally coming up with a letter which states that the developer's application for service has been accepted, but it is no

guarantee he will get water when he starts to build.

To erase any doubts about what the water situation is, and what the district is doing about it, Bargetto said he wanted the district "to make a strong statement." He said "No one believes us... we should make it clear."

Director Mervin Garibotto said he had attended a hearing on another large development, at which the developer stated he had been guaranteed water by the district.

Johnson reminded the directors of a consultant study, now in progress, that will determine the extent of the overdraft, and outline how alternate sources can be developed. "I have tried to convey to this board that we are gathering information for a strong statement," he said, adding that he cannot make recommendations until that information is ready sometime next month.

Perry told the directors that he found it "hard to comprehend" their worry. A developer, he said, is never guaranteed water. "When you get a (connection) permit is the first time you know you have water... that is always the risk of a developer."

Commending the directors for "laying plans to have solutions (to the water problem) five years from now," Perry said "I do not see your concern." Even if his project didn't come up with water from the district, he said, "we have other alternatives. This is not the end of the world for us."

Declaring that the district cannot refuse water applications "until we have a moratorium," Izant said, "it is the people who came here in the last 10 years who are causing this 36 percent overdraft. Now, they don't want anyone else to come in." And he said

that the overdraft figures are "only an educated guess" and are being refined. Izant said the district is trying to solve the problem, "but no one seems to be listening."

Pointing to an agenda which

showed water service applications for "nearly 200" new units, Izant said, "Our only choice is to send them our letter that they may get water when the time comes."

That was in answer to Kriege's statement that the water supply is finite, and "somewhere along the line we can't build anymore. In his discussion of the water supply, Kriege often refers to a moratorium, "because I want people to get used to hearing the word."

In the end, the directors ruled that Johnson should attend the next Planning Commission hearing on the O'Neill Ranch, which will be held July 16 at Soquel High School.

Second Supervisorial candidate Robley Levy, who was in the audience, said, "People really want to know the facts about water. I am pleased he (Johnson) is going to attend the hearing. Communications with the Planning Department

need to be improved so they can make informed decisions."

Mrs. Levy also said she was surprised the district had not taken part in the county's deliberations on the General Plan revision, saying both San Lorenzo Valley and Santa Cruz had testified on the need to preserve the watershed and ground recharge areas.

Johnson said he had participated in some discussion "at the Water Commission level," but these pertained only to urban area problems.

Anna Jean Cummings said the district should also get the county to determine what the "maximum buildout" will be in the revised general plan. "That is critical. It is information you should be interested in."

Hearing this, the directors asked Johnson to review the General Plan revision and report back to them.

GREEN SHEET
July 9, 1980

REFERENCE