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A large crowd fills First Congregational Church on Thursday for the debate over whether to build a desalination plant.

Proponents, foes weigh benefits, costs of desal

Debate on \$100 million proposal draws a crowd

Desalination

by KIMBERLY WHITE

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SANTA CRUZ — Representatives on both sides of a contentious proposal to build a desalination plant debated for nearly 90 minutes Thursday evening in front of an audience of more than 100 people.

Proponents say the plant would provide a reliable source of water in a worst-case drought scenario, while opponents say the costs are too high financially and environmentally.

The debate, held at First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz and hosted by the League of Women Voters of Santa Cruz County, covered largely familiar territory.

Santa Cruz and the Soquel Creek Water District — which serve about 140,000 customers combined — would split that cost, as well as the freshwater it produces, pegged at about 2.5 million gallons per day. Santa Cruz receives its water from surface sources and would get priority on desalinated water during the dry summer months.

SEE DESAL ON A11

4.15.11
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MIKE ROTKIN,

former Santa Cruz mayor

DESAL

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The Soquel Creek Water District receives its supply from underground aquifers, so those customers would have first call in winter months.

Former Mayor Mike Rotkin and Toby Goddard, Santa Cruz's water department conservation manager, said desalination alternatives proposed by opponents — including conservation and water swaps between the district and city — already have been studied and found to be deficient. While expensive and energy intensive, they said, a desalination plant would provide the most reliable source of supplemental water.

Rick Longinotti, co-founder of the Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives group, and James

Bentley, the retired superintendent of water plant and production for the city, contended that droughts do not occur frequently enough to warrant the cost of the plant, which officials now peg at nearly \$100 million.

Longinotti also said a disproportionate amount of the energy used to operate the plant would come from coal-powered plants, resulting in more greenhouse gas emissions. Meanwhile, California has been tasked with decreasing those emissions by 80 percent by 2050. Longinotti and Bentley also contend the water situation would be greatly improved if officials spent half the money they would dedicate to the plant on increased conservation efforts and rebate programs.

"Nature has limits and we need to learn how to live within them," Longinotti said,

a comment followed by a loud round of applause.

Rotkin and Goddard said the city and district do want to implement alternative ideas as long as they're feasible, but "we don't want the city to depend upon solutions to our water problem that might work or might not work" when a drought occurs, Rotkin said.

County residents already use less water than the rest of the state, Goddard noted, and imposing additional conservation measures during a drought of up to 40 percent would result in not only dried-up yards and gardens, but far-reaching public health hazards.

"Opponents would have you believe with just rainbarrels and composting toilets, there would be no need for desal ... but in our climate, that won't take us very far," Rotkin said,

adding that while there may be some merit to composting toilets, "successful programs have to have widespread appeal and be socially acceptable to be effective."

He and Goddard also pointed out that the federal government is about to require Santa Cruz to reduce water intake by 800 million gallons each year to protect local fish and wildlife, which makes the need for an alternative water source even more necessary.

Earlier this month, the city of Santa Cruz directed water officials to continue talks with federal authorities about ensuring any diversions from local streams do not jeopardize the endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead.

"We don't think of this as our problem or their problem," Goddard said. "We look at this as a regional problem."