

Sierra Club wants no part of Soquel water district

By **MARINA MALIKOFF**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The Sierra Club has declined an invitation to appoint a representative to the Soquel Creek Water District's public advisory committee, saying the panel isn't as public as it ought to be.

"Other environmental groups have left the PAC, citing lack of openness in the process," George Jamal, the club's regional chairman said in a letter to Laura Brown, water district general manager. "There has been no indication that their concerns have been addressed."

But the very purpose of the committee, Brown said, is to encourage public participation as the agency considers water-supply options.

"The whole reason why the water district started the PAC process was because we knew any effort to address water issues in this county will be controversial," Brown said. "I thought the Sierra Club would want to

Environmental group declines bid to join public advisory group

be a part of that."

It didn't, and neither did the Environmental Council, which recalled its representative in August. An appointee from another environmental group, Friends of Soquel Creek, left a few months later. The remaining environmental groups represented on the 25-member panel are the Coastal Watershed Council and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"Both groups documented problems all along and requested that they be addressed," said former Environmental Council representative Barbara Graves. She said that during her stint on the committee, the board was un-

responsive to the concerns of committee members.

Among the issues Graves and Jamal pointed to was a recent inquiry by the District Attorney's Office into an alleged violation of the state's open meeting law. It found the agency had technically violated the law when it prevented public testimony at a second hearing on a proposed well but no action was taken because the water district had elected to reopen testimony.

Jamal also took issue with the board's March 2 decision to buy land that could be the site of a diversion project. Critics of the decision said the \$600,000 offer to buy the 32

creekside acres along Soquel-Old San Jose Road was premature because the advisory committees had not evaluated all water supply options.

"The board's recent decision to purchase the Leporini property ... appears to exclude supply options that would not affect Soquel Creek and wildlife," wrote Jamal.

Brown said the board had already invested \$120,000 in options and offered to purchase the property to save its 45,000 customers \$20,000 needed to extend the option again. The decision to purchase, Brown said, does not mean the board has committed to build the multimillion-dollar holding pond and treatment facility.

"The implication that the district could build a water supply project that the community opposes is ridiculous," Brown said. "The community has to support whatever we end up doing, which again is the whole reason for the PAC."