

Desal still most divisive water idea

Desalination
Civinomics survey, online
ratings evaluate alternatives

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SANTA CRUZ » Remarks from participants streaming out of last month's science-fair style fair exploring water supply alternatives for Santa Cruz demonstrated a truth that still exists about seawater desalination many years after it was first proposed — it's polemical.

When 117 visitors were surveyed leaving the "Our Water, Our Future" event, the project that received the most and least favorable reactions was desalination, said Robert Singleton, whose firm, Civinomics, conducted the surveys. About one in four participants were surveyed.

"There is no run-away, clear project" that was a slam dunk for visitors, he said. "But by far, the most divisive was desal."

Singleton and fellow Civinomics co-founder Manu Koenig presented results of the survey and online ratings of 56 supply options to the city's Water Supply Advisory Committee last week. The City Council appointed the panel after political pressure curtailed development of a desalting plant.

Singleton stressed many of the survey participants are already engaged in the water debate. Therefore, the survey results were not representative of how the larger public might view the proposals.

Nonetheless, the alternatives fair, survey and online rankings "showcase their commitment to doing the process differently," Singleton said

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of city leaders. "They genuinely care about building trust with the community about the process."

The committee voted Wednesday to run 13 alternatives — including desalination, reuse, storage and conservation initiatives — through an in-depth screening model. But Water Director Rosemary Menard said other options are still on the table and the public's input

through Civinomics is helpful.

"It's really input into their process, but it is not going to be used explicitly" for making decisions, she said of the committee.

Desalination, which the council in 2005 voted as the city's preferred project, performed poorly in the online survey hosted by Civinomics, which invites comments, questions and interaction with the authors of individual proposals. Respondents gave desal low rankings for the city's four criteria: effectiveness, prac-

ticability, environmental benefits and economic benefits.

Yet, Singleton said desalination got the highest marks among in-person survey respondents outside the alternatives fair. Proponents say the project is the best for generating enough water to carry Santa Cruz through the worst-case drought.

The project that received the highest rankings online for effectiveness — a measure of how much water would be generated, saved or stored — and practicability — cost and politi-

cal feasibility — is storing water off-stream in limestone quarries on the North Coast.

Joe Ben Bevirt of Santa Cruz, founder Joby Aviation, was pleased his \$44 million reservoir concept for the Lidell and San Vicente quarries is getting high marks among the 1,900 unique visitors to the Civinomics site. He said the site and fair are good ways to engage water customers.

"It feels like everyone is really pulling hard to improve our water supply," he said.