

Desalination opponents again hammer SC officials

Others express support
for plan

Desalination

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SANTA CRUZ — Residents got a second shot Monday to sound off about a massive report that outlines plans by the city of Santa Cruz and a neighboring water agency to build a controversial seawater desalination facility.

Hundreds of ratepayers packed First Congregational Church to both criticize and praise the draft environmental evaluation of a controversial plan to protect the city from drought and the Soquel Creek Water District from saltwater intrusion. The majority of speakers were opposed, citing concerns on the need, cost, effect on marine life, location of a pump station and the quality of desalinated water.

David Casterson, chairman of the Santa Cruz group of the Sierra Club, said his organization's board does not support the desal plan.

"We don't feel that you've looked at alternatives significantly enough and canceled some as unfeasible," Casterson said. "That doesn't merit the name Santa Cruz. We are people who care about the environment. We don't dismiss things; we explore them."

Opponents repeated calls for water transfers, greater conservation and other measures, the totality of which the city and district conclude in the report won't solve their problems. Some questioned the city's wisdom in choosing six years ago to limit future customer rationing at 15 percent, while still others raised the specter of conspiracy — noting the city's water director is a leader in a pro-desal lobbying group and that a consulting firm that authored the report wrote

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UC Santa Cruz's growth plan.

But several spoke in favor of the plant, urging the city to include in the report more details about the negative impacts on residential water users, gardens and public safety if the plan fails at the ballot box or with regulators.

The county's former health director, Rama Khalsa, said she was concerned about what happens "if we don't have new sources of

water that aren't relying on weather and good luck and the ocean doesn't continue to rise." She said curtailment of 35 percent — what the district would require without desalination — would drastically affect cleanliness and disease prevention for medical centers.

Longtime civic leader Carol Fuller said desal will address the threat of climate change.

"This seems to be long-range planning," she said. "Like an insurance policy."

The city and district have planned a facility that would transform up to 7 million gallons of seawater each

day into 2.5 million gallons of drinking water by removing salt and other materials. The plant would be built to be expandable.

The additional water would act as safeguard for a city that relies almost entirely on the San Lorenzo River and North Coast streams that are dependent on rainfall. Regulators have mandated a reduction in diversions to protect habitat for endangered fish, and the district needs to immediately reduce pumping of its overtaxed aquifers.

The facility is expected to cost \$129 million, a figure that includes the nearly \$15

million already spent by the two agencies. The city says it has notified property owners who would be affected by the proposed desal facilities, including eight potential sites for a pump station that will move ocean water to the plant near Natural Bridges and Delaware Avenue.

The city will accept public comment by letter or email until Aug. 12, which represents an extension of the original deadline by 30 days.

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