

# Much more to come about desalination

*Desalination*  
Vote, environmental report are the next steps

By J.M. BROWN

[jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com)

SANTA CRUZ — The weeks and months to come will prove important for the debate over a proposed desalination plant.

On Nov. 6, Santa Cruz voters will decide whether to amend the city charter to mandate a future vote on desalination. While the City Council already passed an ordinance this spring to give voters that power in June 2014 or later, the outcome of November's vote could be a

good indicator of how many citizens are engaged about desalination.

In November or December, the city expects a draft environmental impact report to be released. The public will have an opportunity to comment in meetings throughout the spring before the report is modified and brought to the City Council and Soquel Creek Water District board for a vote.

Then, a lengthy permitting process will begin, with state and federal regulators picking apart the environmental, financial and growth impacts. But as Bill Kocher, the city's water director, said, "The most important element is the vote."

## GOT QUESTIONS?

At noon Monday, the Sentinel will host a forum on desalination for readers to pose questions to staff writer J.M. Brown and other participants. To join, visit [www.santacruzsentinel.com/desal](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/desal). If you have questions about desalination that you'd like the Sentinel to answer in future stories, send an email to [jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com) and put 'desal' in the subject line.

There are about 30,000 water customers in unincorporated parts of the county and a portion of Capitola who can't be included in the vote because they live outside the city's electoral jurisdiction. County Supervisor John Leopold is working on a plan for how to place a mea-

sure on the ballot so they can be heard.

"Right now we have no voice in the system," he said.

The district board also plans to call an election for its service area, but details still are being worked out by staff. In October, the

board will discuss its capital improvement projects and an expansion of its tiered rate structure — both of which, along with desalination, will impact water bills dramatically.

The district's former director, Laura Brown, said, if desalination fails, "We would all be back at the table figuring out what to do. I think Plan B has not been developed."

Rather than focus on votes, former UC Santa Cruz ombudsman Laurie McCann, who has been involved in river restoration projects for decades, said water officials, opponents and ratepayers would benefit from working with a mediator to explore

common ground.

"It would create an opportunity for people to be in dialogue rather than just to win or be right," she said.

Former county health director Rama Khalsa, who is a member of the Sustainable Water Coalition that favors desalination as a supply option, also hopes for civility.

"My hope is to just keep learning more and keep educating the community and keep supporting rational, thoughtful debate about what will work and not," she said. "Having a regional approach is a good idea."

Follow Sentinel reporter J.M. Brown on Twitter at [Twitter.com/jmbrownreports](https://twitter.com/jmbrownreports)

9-30-12