

DESALINATION

Desal task force moves forward on public outreach

Desalination

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SANTA CRUZ — Debate over a desalination consultant's contract extension exposed a splinter Wednesday in the joint planning for a seawater desalination facility.

A nearly \$400,000 extension for the Kennedy-Jenks advisory firm was initially

approved Nov. 7 by the desalination task force, which is comprised of two members each of the Santa Cruz City Council and Soquel Creek Water District. The agencies have paid the company \$1.4 million since 2008 to work on the controversial water supply project, which is estimated to cost about \$125 million to continue studying

and construct.

But the council on Nov. 27 sent the contract back to the task force, seeking to limit the company's work on education and communication to environmental review. A draft environmental report is expected in March.

District board member Bruce Daniels, who

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chairs the task force, said the panel's effectiveness is weakened if the council or the district start placing restrictions on their own portions of such contracts.

"The two agencies will rip it apart and we will end up never getting anything done," he said.

Daniels added that he might recommend having future contracts about public outreach be administered through the district, where there has been less vocal opposition to desalination.

City Councilman Don Lane said the task force has to prepare for growing opposition to the facility from city vot-

ers and for the council to respond. Voters overwhelmingly approved a measure in November saying they want a future say on building the plant.

"There is more of this in our future," Lane said.

However, Lane said he would try to better anticipate the concerns the council would raise over desalination before the task force approves future plans related to the project.

The task force approved on Wednesday the Kennedy-Jenks firm's continued work on the environmental impact report and agreed to limit its public education and communication work to that review. Outreach materials will be reviewed regularly by task force members to ensure they don't carry a tone of advocacy, rather than education. The firm's work on searching for grant

funding and how to build the project will be discussed later.

Critics urged the task force to fund alternatives rather than the facility.

John Aird said he believed the district and city were on "third base" in planning for the plant but the community, as evidenced by the Nov. 6 vote on Measure P, appear to be on "first base."

"What I would be doing is putting money on what the other alternatives are, to have a parallel game here," he said.

District board member Bruce Jaffe said, "We are looking at the options that we have if there is not a desal plant because it's not a sure thing."

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