

City weighs contract for desal planning

Opponents urge council to end consultant work on controversial project

Desalination Plant

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SANTA CRUZ — Today, opponents of a proposed desalination plant will urge the City Council to stop payments to a San Francisco consultant for environmental, engineering and public relations work for a project that is far from being approved.

Water Director Bill Kocher will ask the council to approve spending another \$290,000 this year to cover the city's 50 percent share of costs for Kennedy/Jenks Consultants, a technical advisory group that has worked on the controversial proposal to build a desalination facility since 2008. If approved, the third contract amendment for \$580,000, the largest for the firm so far, would bring to \$1.4 million the total amount committed by the city and its desalination partner, Soquel Creek Water District, for the firm's work through early 2012.



KOCHER

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"What they are doing is public communication; there is a lot at stake here," Kocher said, citing a series of public meetings and literature about desalination that the firm coordinated last year. "People need to make informed decisions."

But opponents of desalination, which the city is weighing as a countermeasure for drought, say the consultant's work should cease until the council evaluates whether

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er the plant — which could transform 2.5 million gallons of seawater every day — is even needed or feasible. An environmental impact report won't be completed until the fall, and there are separate studies under way exploring future water demand and the potential for water exchanges between Santa Cruz and Soquel Creek Water District during high-yield periods for both.

"The council members may conclude ... that the reason for building the desal plant is no longer valid," said Paul Gratz, a founder of the grassroots group Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives.

Kocher and Kennedy/Jenks suggest the company's contract should be more lucrative this year because the scope of work will increase as the environmental impact report nears completion. In addition to drafting financing plans and greenhouse gas reduction strategies for the facility, the firm will chart the city's response to opponents, who charge that desalination is too energy-intensive and

unnecessary considering demand is down 20 percent systemwide from predictions made five years ago.

The original \$250,000 contract with Kennedy/Jenks, signed in March 2008, contains an annual renewal option. Extensions for \$350,000 and \$300,000 were approved in February 2009 and March 2010, respectively. The city's share of funding for the consultant will come from capital improvement dollars within the water department.

City Councilman David Terrazas, a member of a desalination task force created by the city and Soquel Creek Water District, said he wants to closely monitor spending on the project. But he said he believed Kocher had demonstrated why the consultant was necessary — that "it's important to have a community plan to talk about the water needs of the community."

Under the contract, technicians will cost between \$100-\$130 per hour, while engineers will cost between \$125-\$230 an hour, plus a 3 percent surcharge to cover communications, postage and copies. Any maps, photos and third-party advisors will be charged to the city at the firm's cost, plus 10 percent.

Kennedy/Jenks is just one of several desalination consultants employed by the city and Soquel Creek Water District. The agencies are sharing the cost of a separate \$4.1 million design plan and \$1.2 million EIR.

The council and the Soquel Creek Water District could vote on the project next year. Opponents have suggested putting the project on the ballot next year.

Also today, the council will consider a request to eliminate two wastewater treatment positions — one of which is open — and replace them with a new lab technician position and the reclassification of two other posts to improve employee recruitment and retention, as well as provide a plan for handling increasing regulations.

Top-step pay for the technician position would be \$47,388 per year, and the reclassified positions for a chemist and environmental inspector in to the supervisor category will mean a 7 percent and 9 percent increase in top-step pay, respectively, for those jobs.

The changes will cost the city an estimated \$93,000 every year, to be paid from the wastewater enterprise fund.