

Commission calls for completing desal analysis

Desalination
**Advisory panel
 questions charge
 of new public panel**

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SANTA CRUZ— The Santa Cruz Water Commission called Monday for the city to complete an environmental analysis of a seawater desalination proposal while a separate committee explores alternatives amid impending drought.

Chair Andy Schiffrin, a long-

time UC Santa Cruz lecturer and policy aide for Santa Cruz County, said, "It's extremely irresponsible on the part of the City Council and City Manager's Office not to go forward" with addressing 400 comments and questions submitted by the public and regulators. He noted certifying the report does not require project approval.

"If no EIR is completed and another year is added to the process, we may not have that other year," said Schiffrin, whose comments were echoed by other commissioners. "We may be

having to do something expeditiously."

With just 10 percent of normal rainfall to date since July, the city faces a third consecutive year of dry conditions without some meaningful change during the next three months. Residents and businesses have been under a water-shortage alert since May, and the Loch Lomond Reservoir and San Lorenzo River flow are at their lowest levels in at least 15 years.

The commission will consider a formal recommendation on the EIR in February. Facing grow-

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 ing opposition to desalination, the council approved in November the formation of a 14-member advisory committee, two of whose members will come from the commission.

However, commissioners raised concerns Monday about how their duties will intersect with the committee during the year or longer that it reviews options for stabilizing and managing supply. The commission — seen by desal opponents as supportive of the controversial

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project — expressed skepticism about the committee's composition and charge, saying it won't contain the expertise needed to generate sound recommendations.

"The challenge is how you work that depth into a time-condensed project," Commissioner David Green Baskin said, adding he hopes the committee will do more than just reject desalination.

"How do you make this

community open to all alternatives?" he asked. "When we are talking about fact-finding, it's called an EIR process." Assistant City Manager Tina Shull acknowledged a "duplication of effort" between the commission and committee, the latter of which can't possibly go into the depth reached by the Water Commission over the years dealing with curtailment, rate impacts, capital improvements and other topics related to a supply-affected by drought, fish habitat protection and planned growth.

However, Shull said the committee is needed

because, although officials have been studying how to generate new supply for two decades, the community "hadn't been coming along with this all the way."

She added, "We do want lay people on this committee; we think it's important to have a range of perspectives."

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