

Monterey County approves desal project
Monterey County Herald-4/7/10
By Jim Johnson

Praising unprecedented collaboration in the face of a looming deadline, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors conditionally approved a proposed regional seawater desalination project Tuesday.

Acknowledging concerns about the way the proposal's supporting agreements were drafted in secret, as well as questions about their details, the board nevertheless indicated that failure to approve the proposal held too great a risk.

County officials noted that Administrative Law Judge Angela Minkin, who initiated the settlement process in which the agreements were drafted, set a deadline of today for submitting the proposal. Missing the deadline, they suggested, would expose Monterey Peninsula residents to the real possibility that state water officials would take control of the issue, essentially what to do about a pending state-ordered cutback on use of Carmel River water.

While the board voted unanimously in favor of most of the proposal, which would draw brackish water from wells north of Marina and turn it into fresh water at a nearby desalination plant before shipping it to Monterey Peninsula customers, Supervisor Jane Parker voted against the settlement and water purchase agreements.

Parker argued that the agreements were so complex, confusing and even occasionally contradictory that an independent review should be conducted and the public should be allowed more time to respond. The proposal was drafted in confidential negotiations before its public release a week ago.

But Supervisor Dave Potter sought to defend the board's actions as necessary despite the concerns raised by Parker and several others.

"None of us wanted to craft these agreements this way but we didn't create this box -- the judge did," he said. "Are there going to be questions and concerns? Yes. This is a suspicious community."

Potter argued that it didn't make sense to risk implementation of the Carmel River water cutback order or the issue going to litigation and state control. He noted the long history of delay involving efforts to seek a solution on the Monterey Peninsula, and said state officials will no longer believe that the local community is capable of coming up with one.

He also praised the efforts of all involved in creating the proposal and noted more than a dozen agencies and organizations had indicated support for it.

"This is the first time we've seen this kind of collaboration on this issue," Potter said.

Under a public-private partnership, the Monterey County Water Resources Agency would own the wells, the Marina Coast Water District would own the desal plant and oversee the water, and California American Water would build a pipeline to deliver the water to its customers. The Monterey Regional Pollution would handle the resulting brine from the desal plant.

The proposal has drawn wide support from Monterey Peninsula mayors, and business, hospitality and labor groups, as well as environmental groups such as the Surfrider Foundation, and public interest groups such as the Public Trust Alliance and Citizens for Public Water.

On Tuesday, a large group of supporters spoke in favor of the proposal at the board meeting, urging the board to approve it and arguing that it represented the Monterey Peninsula's best hope -- after years of delay -- to avoid a costly cutback to its water supply that would ravage the local economy and its residents' quality of life.

Both county officials and supporters acknowledged the proposal will be expensive -- it will cost an estimated \$4,000 per acre foot and double customers' water bills -- but is the least expensive alternative and less costly than doing nothing.

Supervisor Lou Calcagno, who played a key role in getting cooperation on the proposal, also acknowledged concerns about the agreements and the public process, but said the board had to trust its Water Resources Agency staff at some point. Besides, Calcagno added, there will be more opportunity for public input during the California Public Utilities Commission's consideration of the proposal.

"This won't be the final hearing," he said.

Supervisor Simon Salinas, the board's chairman, said the threat of ending up under state control was too much to ignore.

"The Wednesday deadline is real and the last thing I want is to lose local control," Salinas said.

Hearings before Judge Minkin are expected to begin in early May, and the PUC review is expected to begin in June and be finished by August.#

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