

# **The San Diego Union-Tribune.**

## **'Repurified' wastewater backed for home use**

### **Citizens panel forwards proposal to S.D. council**

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A diverse panel of San Diegans yesterday embraced a plan to recycle highly treated wastewater by piping it to the San Vicente Reservoir and eventually to customers citywide.

If adopted by the City Council, the costly and controversial project would be the only one of its kind in California. Forum participants said they want San Diego to become a national model for water recycling.

"We hope it will be a historic step," said Judy Swink, a panelist who lives near Point Loma.

The \$210 million proposal – dubbed "toilet to tap" by opponents in the late 1990s – was one of the options considered in a \$900,000 study that the council commissioned last year. It now moves to the council's natural resources committee.

Securing a local water supply was a top priority for the panelists because San Diego is almost entirely dependent on imports from the Colorado River and Northern California. The city's water demand is expected to grow 25 percent by 2030.

"For my grandchildren's sake, we need a sustainable water supply, and it's right here," said Gerald Handler, a panel member and dental surgeon from La Jolla. The panel consists of participants from different ethnic backgrounds and professions as varied as environmental activist and small-business owner.

Handler initially was skeptical about turning wastewater into drinking water, he said, but learning about the science of water reclamation and San Diego's water needs made him an advocate.

"The more you know, the more you are convinced that this is the way of the future," he said.

Not everyone sees it that way.

Former Councilman Bruce Henderson of Pacific Beach was a leading opponent of a similar water recycling project that the council spiked in the late 1990s after public outcry.

He contends that San Diego should focus on water conservation, which he said is cheaper and less risky than treating wastewater. He opposes drinking "repurified" wastewater because of the possibility of human error in the treatment process.

Though Henderson isn't on the citizens panel, he promised to register his concerns publicly as the city's recycling strategies move forward.

"There is a simple solution," he said. "Ask the voters, 'Do you want toilet to tap or do you want conservation?'"

The prospect of drinking highly treated wastewater makes many residents uneasy, according to a phone survey of 406 San Diegans sponsored by the city in 2004. Respondents heavily supported a wide range of applications for recycled water – for irrigating golf courses and use in industrial processes and toilets – but only about a quarter of them backed its use for drinking water.

The results showed that public support improved from 28 percent to about 50 percent when respondents were given more information about safeguards and water testing standards.

Yesterday, panel members said they want to maximize the city's use of recycled water and the best way to do that is to use a mix of strategies. Their final statement was unanimously supported by the group of roughly 30 people, though one individual said he wanted to see even more aggressive water recycling goals.

The statement called for getting new customers for nonpotable water from the city's South Bay Water Reclamation Plant. That plan's projected cost of \$1 million is the cheapest of the six options scrutinized by the panel.

For San Diego's North City Water Reclamation Plant, the panel wants to see highly treated wastewater piped to the San Vicente Reservoir, where it would mix with raw river water and eventually be distributed to faucets citywide.

That effort, called "indirect potable reuse," includes building water treatment systems using technology such as reverse osmosis. This project was one of the most expensive strategies examined in the city's study.

However, it would maximize the North City treatment plant's recycling capacity and provide the most recycled water of any option reviewed by the citizens panel.

Northern Virginia has the only comparable program in the nation, though water agencies as close as Orange County have long been using highly treated wastewater to augment and protect drinking water aquifers. Proponents of recycling wastewater point out that virtually all major river systems in the United States, including the Colorado River, are heavily used as dumping grounds for treated sewage.

"The assembly considers (purified) water to be superior in quality to other sources," said the panel's statement. "Indirect potable use broadens the possible uses of this resource and is the most flexible approach to maximize . . . the city's water resources."

Such remarks surprised some backers of water recycling.

"I didn't foresee that there would be this strong of support for indirect potable reuse," said Fred Zuckerman of Tierrasanta, who was consulted on the city's water supply study.

Is the rest of San Diego ready for an injection of such water?

"I think so," Zuckerman said, "but who can foresee what the politicians will do?"

Several panelists said during and after yesterday's meeting that they were committed to lobbying for the San Vicente project despite San Diego's troubled past with wastewater reuse proposals. They've already started discussing how to persuade council members to accept wastewater recycling.

"I am hopeful (the council) will keep an open mind . . . and not just come out against it so that it becomes impossible for them to come on board later," said Phil Pryde, a panelist and former board member of the San Diego County Water Authority.

The panel also acknowledges the barrier of public perception in the San Vicente plan. A major section of its final document outlines a "communication strategy" that includes working with schools and "engaging well-known local leaders as spokespersons."

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