

The Daily Transcript

Sanders cites costs as part of opposition to recycled water

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Mayor Jerry Sanders has voiced his opposition to recycling water for the purpose of drinking, citing lack of public support and high costs, but water experts say that projected water demands leave the region with few alternatives.

Mayor Sanders, who announced his position on the issue Wednesday, feels that the public has demonstrated it is against drinking recycled water repeatedly, both at San Diego City Council meetings as well as during Sanders' public outings, according to Fred Sainz, the mayor's spokesman.

"Lots of people have yelled out, 'Keep the Chargers.' Nobody has yelled out, 'We want to drink toilet water,'" said Sainz.

"He (Sanders) believes that this is a settled matter and it's not an issue that the public will support or have any patience for."

This point will be put to the test July 26 when the City Council's Natural Resources and Culture Committee will meet to review the Water Reuse Study, which the city's water department put together at the request of the council in January 2004. The study, which took over a year and cost the department approximately \$1 million, puts forward six water reuse proposals. Four advocate recycling wastewater -- by using advanced water treatment methods -- for human consumption. For example, one of the plans calls for the construction of a plant to treat 16 million gallons per day (mgd) and pipe it 22 miles to San Vicente reservoir. The price tag for the project: \$237.6 million. According to Marsi Steirer, the department's deputy director, the committee could either accept the study or ask the department to make changes. A date for a full City Council discussion on the study has not been set.

A similar proposal was shot down in 1999 by the City Council.

Sainz pointed to the relining of the All American Canal, the Imperial Irrigation District water transfer, the proposed Carlsbad desalination plant and conservation measures as alternatives to recycled water for potable purposes that the mayor envisions.

The alternatives to recycled water for meeting both irrigation and human consumption needs are few, said Mark Weston, general manager of Helix Water district, which recently concluded its own feasibility study on recycling water for drinking.

“All of the experts say that increasing imported water has many challenges,” said Weston. The current production from the Colorado River basin is below average, he said. “If that drought continues, that will not be a source. The only other source is ag-to-urban water exchanges from the central valley, and those will be difficult and expensive. Other than that, desal and recycled water are our best options.”

Although both the San Diego County Water Authority and **Poseidon Resources Corp.** are pursuing plans to build a 50 mgd seawater desalination plant that could create a valuable local source of water for the region, the project is far from a sure thing. Aside from ongoing negotiations between the water authority and Poseidon, the plant has been opposed by environmental groups for numerous reasons, among them its expected negative impacts on sea life. The groups are expected to come out in force if the project is taken to the California Coastal Commission for necessary permitting.

The county imports nearly 90 percent of its water from outside sources. SDCWA expects to decrease its dependence on water from the Metropolitan Water District from 79 percent in 2005 to 29 percent by 2020. In its water outlook it does not include recycled water for drinking in its budget. It focuses on increased conservation, desalination, the IID water transfer and the relining of the All-American Canal.

Ken Weinberg, director of water resources at SDCWA, acknowledged that the region is “pretty limited” in terms of creating local sources.

Sainz said the mayor’s position on recycled water is also related to the high costs associated with the treatment and infrastructure required by the process.

“For the mayor this is also an economic issue,” he said. “The mayor would question whether or not that money could be better spent on infrastructure rather

than this untested process.” Sainz also noted that the mayor doesn’t dispute the science behind the treatment process.

Helix Water Authority’s board of directors voted on May 31 to put the district’s recycled water project on hold, citing costs and the availability of recycled water. “Water produced from this project would cost approximately \$1,624 per acre-foot, where as currently water purchased from the aqueduct system costs \$514 per acre-foot,” reads an explanation on the department’s Web site.

Helix’s Weston cautioned about too much reliance on imported water. “We still have to be aware that we are at the end of all the pipelines.”

Send your comments, thoughts or suggestions to jeran.wittenstein@sddt.com