

# The Daily Transcript

## Recycled water study sent to city council for review

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The San Diego City Council will address the City Water Department's one year, \$1 million Water Reuse study that could bring recycled wastewater to local taps.

On Wednesday, the City Council's Natural Resources and Culture Committee voted to send the study to the full council to discuss the issue more fully. A date has not yet been set for the City Council review.

The study outlines six water reuse proposals, four of which advocate recycling wastewater for drinking purposes. The most notable plan would cost \$237.6 million and calls for the construction of an advanced treatment plant to treat 16 million gallons of water per day and pipe it 22 miles to the San Vicente reservoir.

Attention was drawn to the issue last week when Mayor Jerry Sanders made public that he is opposed to recycling water for human consumption, based on his perception of public opinion and the estimated costs of the project.

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

The opposition to the plan by the mayor could signal a replay to the politicization of a similar proposal put forward in 1999. Critics of the plan alleged that the city was planning on piping the recycled water into less affluent neighborhoods. The City Council eventually voted against the proposal.

“Every time something like this comes up it has been shot down because as soon as you label it ‘toilet to tap’ on bumper stickers it’s done,” said Carl Luna, a professor of political science at San Diego Mesa College.

“It’s like fluoridation in the water,” he said. “It’s one of those issues that people get all bent out of shape about and won’t deal with it on a rational level,” said Luna, adding that he believes the proposal won’t make it past the full council.

“The issue of public acceptability is always going to be an important issue when recycled water projects are proposed,” said Mark Weston, Helix Water District’s general manager. Helix recently decided that a water reuse project it had been studying for six months was unfeasible because of costs and an inadequate supply of recycled water. “Unfortunately the phrase ‘toilet to tap’ misrepresents these types of proposed projects,” he said.

During Wednesday’s committee meeting, the main issue was whether or not there had been enough public involvement. Part of the Water Reuse study included workshops geared toward public education. According to Marsi Steirer, deputy director of the water department, the opinions of those participating were overwhelmingly positive after being educated.

Councilwoman Toni Atkins agreed with members of the committee that the issue was very serious and deserved thorough review but said that she felt public awareness of the issue was inadequate.

“I am perfectly fine to move this on to full City Council for further discussion but ... I have heard almost nothing in my district, which means that the people are not aware of this and that’s what concerns me more than anything else,” she said.

During public comment, one speaker characterized the water department’s assertion that the public is well informed as “a bunch of one-sided hogwash.”

Still, San Diego Coastkeeper Executive Director Bruce Reznik feels that the public has been much more involved in the issue than in 1999. He remains optimistic the city will embrace water reuse for drinking.

“The more people are educated on the issue, the more they understand the issue, the more they start to look at reservoir augmentation as a cost effective, viable

and safe option for the region,” he said.

Although Sanders is the highest profile opponent of the proposal, there are a number of critics. Former San Diego City Councilman Bruce Henderson is against water reuse for drinking on the grounds that the scientific data on the health effects are not conclusive.

According to Reznik, sooner or later San Diego will be forced to embrace recycled water for drinking. “We live in a desert, a city that should be supporting 50,000 people with our water supply, and we’re supporting several million,” he said.

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