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## **Divisive water proposal advances Council to discuss treating wastewater**

**By Mike Lee STAFF WRITER**

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A proposal to turn wastewater into drinking water drew both support and questions yesterday from members of a San Diego City Council committee.

The four members of the natural resources committee decided to send the divisive issue to the full council, probably for discussion in September or October. They didn't vote on the merits of "reservoir augmentation," but they said the city should promote an in-depth debate about water reuse and reach a conclusion soon.

Committee members agreed that the city needs to better gauge residents' feelings about the topic, which has been a political hot potato since the late 1990s. Councilwoman Toni Atkins said public hearings need to be extensive. The committee is expected to hold another hearing in the coming weeks and televise it on the city's cable channel.

"I have heard almost nothing about the issue in my district, which means the people don't know," Atkins said. "We have a lot more work to do. I want an informed public."

The city is looking for ways to increase its water supply, particularly as preparation for drought. San Diego imports about 85 percent of its water, and overall water demand is expected to rise 25 percent by 2030.

Last week, Mayor Jerry Sanders announced his opposition to reservoir augmentation, saying he didn't think the public supported a project that detractors have dubbed "toilet to tap."

Despite Sanders' sway, it appears possible that a council majority eventually would support pumping highly treated sewage into one or more drinking water reservoirs. The water would be treated again and piped to homes citywide.

Council President Scott Peters has started rallying support for reservoir augmentation. Peters made a guest appearance at yesterday's committee meeting to promote the idea.

“I just don't think we can turn our backs on a clean, steady, local supply” of water, he said.

Councilman Ben Hueso, a natural resources committee member, said he had no qualms about reclaimed water.

“I trust the science,” he said. “It's good enough to drink.”

In 1999, the City Council spiked a similar proposal after opponents raised concerns about whether the treated wastewater would be sent to largely minority communities.

The talk now about reservoir augmentation arose from a 2004 legal settlement between San Diego and conservation groups. Under the deal, the city was to look for more ways to recycle water, and the City Council commissioned a \$900,000 report on how to increase water reuse. The study was completed this year.

Public testimony by business groups and environmentalists yesterday heavily favored reservoir augmentation.

“As a city, we must not be short-sighted by putting half-measures in place. When the science and technology exists for the safe reuse of 100 percent of this water as an indirect potable supply,” said Terese Ghio, vice president of government affairs for Ligand Pharmaceuticals Inc. of San Diego.

Others were skeptical of the water reuse study. As part of that effort, a panel of community leaders met last summer and unanimously supported reservoir augmentation.

Steve Bilson, whose company sells “gray water” collection and reuse systems for homes, said the city's study ignored viable water reuse options, including his product. He also questioned whether the city's cost estimates for reservoir augmentation were sound.

“It's time to ask some hard questions,” Bilson told the committee. “Where are the real costs?”

Councilman Kevin Faulconer raised similar issues.

“What I think we need to do more of is to look at more detailed numbers and costs,” Faulconer said. “I am unconvinced that potentially spending all of this money is the right way to go.”

Faulconer also said that the city shouldn't let the issue linger unresolved. “I believe that the public wants us to make a decision.”

Yesterday's hearing encouraged environmentalists.

Bruce Reznik, executive director of Coastkeeper, welcomed more public scrutiny of the city's reclamation options.

“I am very convinced that if we really have this debate, we win,” Reznik said.

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### **Water reuse**

Six main options for increasing San Diego's water recycling were identified in the city's water reuse study. The city has two water-reclamation plants.

Strategies at the North City Water Reclamation Plant include:

- Expanding the non-potable water reuse infrastructure. Cost: \$284.7 million. Potential for water recycling: 17.6

million gallons per day (mgd).

- Expanding the non-potable reuse system and building a small-scale advanced water-treatment plant that discharges into wetlands above Lake Hodges. Cost: \$188.3 million. Potential for water recycling: 16.1 mgd

- Expanding the non-potable reuse system and building a large-scale advanced water-treatment plant that discharges into San Vicente Reservoir. Cost: \$237.6 million. Potential for water recycling: 21.2 mgd.

- Strategies at the South Bay Water Reclamation Plant include:

- Expanding the non-potable water reuse system. Cost: \$1 million. Potential for water recycling: 11.6 mgd

- Expanding the non-

potable water reuse system and building a small-scale advanced water-treatment plant that discharges into Otay Lakes. Cost: \$21.6 million. Potential for water recycling: 8 mgd.

■Expanding the non-potable water reuse system and building a large-scale advanced water-treatment plant that discharges into Otay Lakes. Cost: \$96.1 million. Potential for water recycling: 11.3 mgd.

*SOURCE: City of San Diego*