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Rate hike caveats

'Toilet to tap,' sewage plant overhaul must go

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Mayor Jerry Sanders is calling for a whopping 35 percent jump in water and sewer rates to restore San Diego's long-neglected plumbing and to comply with state and federal environmental mandates. There is a good case to be made that capital improvements and attendant rate increases are necessary, but justifying hikes of this magnitude will be difficult. Before Sanders and the City Council impose such sharp hikes, they should make it clear to beleaguered ratepayers – who have shouldered a 50 percent increase in recent years and already pay among the highest rates in the nation – that two much-discussed boondoggles are removed from the table entirely.

The first is the notorious “toilet to tap” project, a mindless \$238 million program that comes with uncertain health risks. The second is the proposed conversion of the Point Loma sewage treatment plant to secondary standards, a colossal \$1 billion waste that would do nothing to reduce sewage spills or improve the ocean environment.

Abolishing these two dubious ventures today would give ratepayers confidence that the city will spend their money wisely on projects that are essential to safeguard their drinking supply and the environment. Confidence is lagging because of such unpopular initiatives as the “toilet to tap” project and because for years the city siphoned off millions of dollars in water and sewage funds to pay for unrelated programs. The most glaring example was a phony “right of way” fee concocted by the City Council to divert money from ratepayers into the general fund.

Sanders' proposal for about a one-third rise in water and sewage rates between now and 2011 would pay for \$1.4 billion in basic capital improvements, including replacing worn-out pumps and pipes. The mayor's plan includes no money for the "toilet to tap" scheme or for rebuilding the Point Loma treatment facility. If the City Council goes forward with these two unnecessary projects, it would have to impose rate hikes that are roughly double those planned by Sanders.

Regardless of the costs, which are substantial, the "toilet to tap" proposal should be scratched for health and safety reasons. Under the plan, raw sewage would be treated and then dumped into the San Vicente reservoir. Reclaimed sewage water is indeed safe for many irrigation purposes and for some industrial uses. But adding it to the drinking supply raises many troubling issues.

For instance, the biomedical revolution is producing a staggering array of new pharmaceuticals excreted by humans into the sewage system. The long-term effects of consuming even minute levels of such drugs is unknown. In a key study, the respected National Research Council warned that converting toilet water to tap water should be employed only as "an option of last resort" because "many uncertainties are associated with assessing the potential health risks of drinking reclaimed water. ... One concern about potable reuse of reclaimed water is the potential health risk from little known or unknown pathogens."

As for spending \$1 billion to overhaul the Point Loma sewage plant, even the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Regional Water Quality Control Board support San Diego's current practice of advanced primary treatment. Converting the plant to secondary treatment standards would do nothing to improve the marine environment.