

## **Not Too Freaked Out About Recycled Sewage**

By [ROB DAVIS](#)

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If San Diego residents are freaked out about using purified sewage as a drinking-water source, you wouldn't have known it Monday.

For all the talk about a populace that's grossed out by the yuck factor of an idea derided as "toilet-to-tap," just 13 people showed up Monday to voice concerns that the City Council was moving forward with the plan.

At a public hearing to consider a water rate increase to fund a pilot study of recycling sewage, just two opponents invoked that pejorative moniker. Ironically, it was the project's proponents who more frequently recited the laundry list of concerns and misconceptions about the safety of recycling sewage.

The council delayed action on the increase until Tuesday because Councilwoman Donna Frye was out sick. But when she returns, the increase has the five votes needed to be approved on a council that has five members who've supported the technology. (Frye, Toni Atkins, Ben Hueso, Jim Madaffer and Scott Peters have all voted to advance it.)

The project's only hurdle has been the potential public outcry. On Monday, the outcry was little more than a whimper. Bruce Reznik, executive director of San Diego Coastkeeper, a proponent, described it as "sort of a dud."

As required by law, the city mailed notices of the rate increase to its 275,000 customers, allowing them the opportunity to protest. (A majority opposing the increase can block it.) Just 5,757 people -- two percent of customers -- protested the rate hike to fund the study.

If Frye gets healthy and the council approves the rate increase Tuesday, it would boost an average household's monthly bills by \$1.12, staying in effect for 18 months. The increase would raise \$10.7 million needed to fund the pilot study, which is expected to take two years and begin in early 2009.

San Diego has had a long and fitful flirtation with the concept of turning sewage into drinking water. It's a dance that's been derailed before by public outcry: the City Council killed a similar effort in 1999 after it got stuck with the toilet-to-tap label.

This time appears to be different, with both a supportive council and proponents' case for creating a new water source boosted by the current supply shortage. Both of San Diego's major supplies, the Sacramento Delta and Colorado River, are strained. The coming year promises to be one of the toughest for drinking water supplies since the early 1990s, with mandatory restrictions on water use possible. A wide array of interests have lined up behind the concept, endorsed by both environmentalists and the local Building Industry Association.

In fact, the most common concern cited by those who spoke wasn't the science behind sewage recycling. It was that the city was again increasing the price it charges for water. The increase is the third since February 2007.

The City Council first approved the pilot study more than a year ago. Faced with opposition from Mayor Jerry Sanders, it hadn't advanced -- despite a council request for outreach to begin in January 2008.

The project now appears headed forward, with the city planning to spend \$7.4 million on a demonstration plant that will provide 1 million gallons of recycled sewage each day. People won't drink the water. That would only happen if a future City Council approves a full-scale project, which could pump as much as 24 million gallons of purified sewage daily into the San Vicente Reservoir.

The city will also spend \$1.7 million on outreach to address and hear concerns from the public. City residents have had a "general sense" that drinking recycled sewage may not be safe, said Jim Barrett, the city's public utilities director.

"We have to establish that dialogue" with skeptical residents, Barrett said.  
"What does it take to get this across that line? I don't know."

Coastkeeper's Reznik acknowledged that opposition exists among city residents but said the city's outreach would be an important tool for reaching them.

"The opposition isn't overwhelming," he said, "and I think most of it comes from misinformation."