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OC takes up plan flushed by L.A.

By Kerry Cavanaugh
Staff Writer

Saturday, October 23, 2004 - Nearly five years ago, a \$55 million water-reclamation project that Los Angeles officials said would "drought-proof" the city was derailed by public outrage over the prospect of drinking recycled toilet water.

Orange County residents had no such qualms.

Five months ago, Orange County broke ground on a \$487 million "toilet-to-tap" project, slated to open in 2007, purifying enough sewage water to serve for 140,000 families.

Far from being repulsed at the thought of drinking reclaimed water, though, residents there are boasting they'll have dependable, cheaper water when imported supplies dry up and leave the rest of Southern California parched.

While politics certainly played a role in the different outcomes -- Los Angeles' project was quietly launched in the middle of a mayoral campaign and while support was building for San Fernando Valley secession -- experts see Orange County's five-year public-education campaign as the determining factor in overcoming the inherent "yuck" factor in toilet-to-tap systems.

"We started telling people from the start that we're purifying sewage water," said Ron Wildermuth, the communications director for the Orange County Water District. "We have not had a group oppose the project after they've listened to the project and the alternatives."

Orange County took their plan to the community, holding neighborhood pizza parties, water treatment plant tours and hundreds of public meetings where they explained how sewer water would be purified and then added to underground water supplies.

Public television personality Huell Howser was hired to narrate a video explaining how earthy-smelling wastewater will be transformed into distilled, crystal clear water.

Politicians, initially skeptical of the project, were convinced to add their support.

"The thought didn't thrill me, to tell you the truth," U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Garden Grove, said of her initial reaction to drinking purified sewage water. "I see at the federal level the fight over water. We need to do something and after looking at the science I realize how lucky we are to be able to do this project."

Los Angeles took a far different approach.

A water-recycling project was initiated in 1990 as a way to reduce Los Angeles' dependence on water imported from the Owens Valley. But toilet-to-tap was mentioned merely as a possibility by city officials in 1993, when they announced state funding for the effort.

Public hearings were held in 1991 and 1995, during the planning process. But otherwise, little public attention was paid as the Department of Water and Power planned and built the East Valley Water Recycling project -- a system to pump 3.2 billion gallons of water from the Tilman Water Reclamation plant in the Sepulveda Basin to the Hansen Dam spreading ground in Sun Valley.

There, it would filter through the pebbly soil into underground aquifers, and become part of the supply that is pumped from wells, treated again, mixed with other water and piped to 70,000 households in the East San Fernando Valley and Southeast LA.

The DWP was so low-key about the project that even then-Mayor Richard Riordan and some City Council members said they were surprised when the agency announced in April 2000 that it was ready to embark on the project.

"They should have been far more candid on what was involved in the project. Reaching out means reaching out in a clear way that people will understand," said Gerald Silver, president of the Homeowners of Encino and a vocal critic of how the DWP handled the project.

In the face of public outrage, then-City Attorney James Hahn suspended the project, saying the DWP had failed to adequately inform the public about its start-up and potential health risks. After he was elected mayor in 2001, Hahn formally killed the toilet-to-tap project.

Current DWP officials say they still speculate whether a Orange County-style public outreach program would have made a difference in Los Angeles.

"I often wonder if I should have done the massive public relations campaign, like Orange County," DWP Water Services Manager Jerry Gewe said. "I was afraid I would create an issue where there wasn't one. My feeling was we were better off to do it and we had the support of the political leadership."

Former DWP general manager David Freeman -- who in the days after the controversy erupted in spring 2000 said he hadn't felt the need to tell Riordan the recycling project was about to begin -- blamed the demise of the program on front-page news stories about toilet-to-tap and turncoat city political leaders.

"We were up against bigger mouths than us," Freeman said. "All it would take is some leadership to explain this to people."

Freeman still maintains that Southern California needs a water-recycling effort to protect the region during the next long-term drought and to replace the water Los Angeles is losing from the Colorado River, the Owens Valley and Northern California.

There are signs that toilet-to-tap could make a comeback.

San Diego -- which previously killed a toilet-to-tap project -- is looking to expand its recycled-water programs to communities that support the idea.

Los Angeles is in the midst of a three-year planning project to meet the city's drinking water, storm water runoff and recycled water needs. Recycled drinking water is among the options being considered at the request of environmentalists.

"This is where we are going to be going in the next few years through the Sun Belt," said G. Wade Miller, executive director of the Water Reuse Association. "There aren't any more virgin water sources."

Gewe said the East Valley Water Recycling project can be resurrected at any time. DWP was considering extending the existing pipeline to deliver treated sewage water for irrigating Hansen Dam area golf courses.

"When we get to the point when we have a sustained drought and come up short, I suspect public opinion will change," Gewe said. "The system is built -- all we need is to turn it on."

Silver, the Homeowners of Encino president, said there could come a time when recycled water would be acceptable for drinking, but only if residents understand and wholeheartedly endorse the program.

"My view is if the public wants it, they should drink recycled water if they choose to," he said.

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