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## East County recycles S.D. water plan Padre Dam board gives OK to explore 'showers to flowers'

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SANTEE – An East County water district is wondering whether a "showers to flowers" plan for recycled water might be more palatable than San Diego's controversial "toilet to tap" idea.

Board members at the Padre Dam Municipal Water District gave staff members the go-ahead last week to explore whether it's practical to require new houses to add a second plumbing system for lawn irrigation using recycled water.

Harold Bailey, director of operations and water quality for the district, said he began considering the idea because of the proposed development of 1,380 homes at Fanita Ranch in Santee.

"This looks like a good opportunity," Bailey said.

The water district serves 125,000 residents in Santee, El Cajon, Lakeside, Flinn Springs, Harbison Canyon, Blossom Valley, Alpine, Dehesa and Crest. It already recycles water for lawn irrigation at businesses, stores and common areas.

But no houses being built in San Diego County are required to have dual plumbing, Bailey said. It has been required elsewhere in the state, most notably at the 3,500-acre Serrano development in El Dorado County, east of Sacramento.



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Don Denniston lifted a cover over sewage that is pumped into a recycling plant at the Padre Dam water district.

The use of highly treated wastewater has long been a controversial topic in San Diego County. A proposal by the city of San Diego to turn wastewater into drinking water, dubbed "toilet to tap" by opponents, was scrubbed in the late 1990s after public outcry.

But the tide may be turning. Last month, a city panel endorsed a plan to recycle treated wastewater by piping it to the San Vicente Reservoir and eventually citywide, faucets included. The proposal now moves to a City Council committee.

Using recycled water can be popular, research suggests, but only if it goes to grass instead of a glass. A recent survey by the San Diego County Water Authority showed that 87 percent of the respondents favored using recycled water for residential yards.

Last year's version of the survey found that only 28 percent of respondents favored adding recycled water to drinking water. This year's survey didn't ask about drinking water.

Padre Dam officials emphasized that the treated wastewater would be used only for watering lawns, not for drinking. A key part of their proposal includes studies to ensure that the pipes carrying the treated wastewater and the drinking water would never mix.

Bailey cringed at a joking suggestion that the program could be called "toilet to grass," instead throwing out the moniker "showers to flowers."

A big unresolved question is how much a dual plumbing system would add to the cost of a house. That's one of the issues Padre Dam staff members will be looking at before they report back to the board. Nick Arthur, Fanita Ranch project manager for developer Barratt American, said installing a dual plumbing system would add "quite a lot" to the cost of a home.

He said Barratt American is planning to use recycled water to irrigate open spaces. But installing the plumbing for each yard would also mean paying to run pipes from the recycling plant to the homes, he said. "It would add to the cost of the home because we're adding that additional system," Arthur said.

In the Serrano development near Sacramento, the cost of running the extra pipes underground is about \$3,000 per home, said Kirk Bone, director of governmental affairs for Parker Development Co., the project's master developer.



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"Treated wastewater is more pure than ivory soap," said Harold Bailey, director of operations and water quality for the Padre Dam Municipal District, which uses recycled water in its office aquarium in Santee.

The density of homes factors into the cost, Bone said, noting that Serrano plans call for three to five homes per acre.

Padre Dam officials say homeowners' lower water bills would eventually make up for the cost of the plumbing systems. More than half of the water used by the average household is for watering plants and lawns, Padre Dam General Manager August Caires said. Recycled water is 15 percent cheaper than drinking water, meaning "environmentally friendly savings," according to board member Andy Menshek.

Although numerous protections would be in place to ensure that recycled water and drinking water don't mix, Bailey said the recycled water is cleansed and treated to such a high level that he wouldn't mind drinking it.

Recalling the old ads touting Ivory soap as "99 44/100 percent pure," Bailey said, "Treated wastewater is more pure than Ivory soap."

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