

The Daily Transcript

The Business of Water: A conversation with Marsi Steirer

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Responsible for delivering water for the second largest city in California, the city of San Diego's Water Department serves approximately 1.3 million customers in a territory that spans 331 square miles. It is the largest of the San Diego County Water Authority's 23 member agencies, providing water to four cities: San Diego, Coronado, Imperial Beach and Del Mar.

The Daily Transcript sat down with Marsi Steirer, the deputy director of the Water Department and discussed topics ranging from how the department is managing its institutional knowledge to its research into recycling water for the purpose of drinking.

What are some issues the city's water department is facing right now?

I think some of the things that are impacting us -- and this is actually an industrywide trend, not just within the city -- is the demographic and the aging of the population and the baby boomers, where we've had a number of rank and file employees as well as members of our executive team who have or will retire shortly. Much like police and fire, for example, there's a lot of people that are in the water business that that's their life career. So when you have someone who's worked there for 30 years and then retires, the thought of having succession planning and the ability to transfer all of that institutional knowledge that is associated with your utility to someone else before that individual leaves is really pretty critical. So we're kind of working through that right now.

How are you dealing with knowledge transfer?

We have a human resources function within the water department and we've been working on developing a succession plan. We identified this as a strategic issue for us when we put together our strategic business plan a couple of years ago. So we

actually have a plan in place to identify key positions, to make sure that when we know an individual is leaving we have the ability to identify some mechanism by which to transfer that knowledge to someone else, whether it's attempting to recruit and hire before that person leaves or make sure information that they have in their head is available on paper.

We're also starting a mentoring program so there's ability for younger employees to be partnered with somebody else to learn their skill set if that's their career direction. These are some new initiatives we're developing and I think they're really important for the future.

How long have you been working on the mentoring program?

Well, the mentoring program is really just under way, within the last month or so. This is something we've been working on in last nine or 10 months we've begun in earnest to identify the potential problem and now we've begun to address it.

Other issues?

This will come as no surprise, but the cost of materials, whether it's steel or plastic or availability of concrete, whether it's on a regional basis because houses are being built and we're competing against roads and other infrastructure projects, or how -- as you see in the news -- a lot of the bulk materials are going to China ... just the availability or the cost increases we've experienced in the last two to three years have really added onto the costs of our capital projects.

A plan to recycle water for the purpose of drinking was unpopular and ultimately shut down in the 1990s. What is different about your recent plan and what steps has the department taken to avoid a similar scenario?

I think what's different is that we've had a large amount of public participation and public involvement from the beginning of this study, both engaging stakeholders by participating in the American Assembly-style workshops. And that was a big commitment on their part because some of them were with us for a total of six full days in the fall of 2004 and then the summer of 2005. We've also launched a Web site; there's our speakers bureau presentation; we have an online survey that asks specific questions that are associated with people's willingness to ultimately drink this advanced treated water.

We've tried to be as effective as we possibly can in engaging the public and have this be an open and participatory process to help guide the decision makers in terms of how to maximize the amount of recycled water that is used in the city.

What was the general consensus found in your probing of public opinion?

I think a lot of people have an understanding that all of the water on earth is basically recycled. The natural process of evaporation and rainfall, going into the groundwater basin or rivers and (water) comes to us in Southern California from hundreds of miles away from Northern California and the Colorado River. All of the people above us have used it and reused it. And I think that they have an understanding -- through our process and presentations and the materials that they've received -- that this advanced treatment basically replicates what nature does, but we're using technology to do that.

There remain people that you need to spend a lot of time with to have them understand because it seems that there is an emotional reaction at times to the idea that you would be drinking advanced treated water that began as waste water. But I think once people have this understanding and read the information, they are pretty much won over.

Can you describe the treatment process that recycled water for drinking purposes would go through?

It would begin with water that's treated to a tertiary level. And that's water that is presently used throughout California and it's governed by California state regulations. It can be applied and used for a variety of purposes: utilization in cooling towers, landscape irrigation, making snow, dust control. So you start with that water and then there's three steps: ultra filtration, which uses membranes; reverse osmosis; and ultraviolet light with hydrogen peroxide that's added. This is the same treatment process that's met with regulatory approval for the Orange County groundwater replenishment project that is presently in construction.

Plans for the future?

The region is heading -- including the water department and other agencies and districts -- in the direction of recognition and support for, as well as undertaking of projects that are associated with the development of local water. And that local water can be enhanced conservation, because as a region we've embraced that for the last 16 years. There's multiple groundwater projects that are taking place in the county, and in fact the city is actually moving forward with some exploratory activities that are associated with San Pasqual Basin; Sweetwater has a project; Helix is looking at a project out in East County; Oceanside's doing a project; and so when you add all of those up, they're small projects but you can get to a decent number in terms of future water supply.

Recycled water, whether it's used for irrigation or industrial uses, or dust control or construction water, or ultimately if it becomes a part of the drinking water supply, many of the member agencies have recognized the importance of having a local

water supply that is locally controlled. So there are cooperative agreements that are taking place and working to lead to that end. This also includes member agencies supporting the water authority and their work on the Carlsbad Desalination project. I think the future answer for our water supply isn't one answer; it's not imported water, it's not desalination, it's -- we like to say -- a diversified water portfolio. It comes from a variety of sources. That's what will help the region have a safe and reliable and locally controlled water supply in the future, and that's really important for all of us.

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