

Sanders Wants to Flush Water Reclamation Plans

By SAM HODGSON Voice Staff Writer

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San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders won't support a plan to turn wastewater into drinking water, giving a political boost to opponents of a city effort to feed its water reservoirs with filtered, treated sewage.

Sanders' decision is the latest move in a decade-long battle over plans to reclaim flushed sewage as potable water. Proponents say it is safe way for the city to lesser its reliance on outside water sources. But critics deride it as a "toilet-to-tap" treatment that threatens public health.

City staffers have been examining the controversial issue for more than a year, studying its safety and financial feasibility. They've produced a lengthy report that summarizes six proposals to diversify the city's water supply. Four include plans to turn sewage into drinking water -- a concept that sputtered out once in San Diego in the 1990s. The study heads to the City Council's Natural Resources and Culture Committee July 26.

Councilmember Donna Frye, who leads the four-member committee, said it is too early to dismiss the option of converting wastewater to drinking water.

"It needs to be looked at, and it needs to be discussed, and you need to have a public hearing before it's closed off," Frye said. "Keep your mind a little bit open until you have the opportunity to hear all sides of the issue. That's what good legislators do."

Sanders' spokesman, Fred Sainz, said Tuesday that the mayor will ask the council not to act on the water reclamation plans because the mayor believes the issue has already been resolved in the public's eye.

"This issue has come up previously before the council," Sainz said. "In fact, it's come up on a number of occasions and the council received a very strong point of view from the public that they were unilaterally opposed to it.

"The mayor believes that this has been resolved, that this has been settled."

In 1999, the City Council halted similar studies after critics infamously dubbed the program "toilet-to-tap." But a City Council committee revived the issue in 2003 at the behest of environmentalists -- a move that led to the study now headed to the council.

In compiling the report, the city assembled a 67-member group that included political, civic, environmental and business representatives to review the possibilities for using recycled water in the city. The group, known as the City of San Diego Assembly on Water Reuse, voted unanimously to support recycling wastewater for human consumption.

The assembly endorsed a proposal that treats the water twice through tertiary and reverse-osmosis treatments. The water is then deposited into a reservoir and mixed with water from other typical sources, such as rivers. Here, the water goes through a final treatment. According to the water reuse study, the proposal endorsed by the assembly would cost more than \$200 million and would bring the level of contaminants to a level appropriate with all federal, state and local health standards.

A similar system is used in Centerville, Va. and El Paso, Texas.

The San Diego scenario would produce 21.2 million gallons per day. The city currently uses 210 gallons a day and imports between 80 and 90 percent of its water from outside sources.

Bruce Reznik, executive director of the environmental group San Diego Coastkeeper, supports the project and said the city already draws 83 percent of its water from two tainted sources -- the Colorado River and State Water Project.

"The Colorado River has so many discharges in it," said Reznik. "I would prefer a program where we have a lot more control."

But long-time opponent Bruce Henderson, a former City Councilman, said water reclamation is still a financially unsound concept that irresponsibly experiments with public health. The cost of treating the water will be exorbitant, he said, affecting the poor, who will pay with both their health and their pocketbooks.

"Are we talking about economic racism?" Henderson said. "The answer is 'Of course we are.' They intend to be using this process and putting reclaimed toilet water into our drinking water. The affluent portion of our society, they can opt out

of this health experiment. They can just drink bottled water."

Sainz said, however, that Sanders' call for inaction is not based on the science or the finance behind the report. He said it is simply a matter of public support.

"He is not arguing with the science behind this," Sainz said. "He is simply stating that he does not support this. He believes that the public has spoken."

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