

Water Reuse Rushes Ahead

By **SAM HODGSON** Voice Staff Writer

July 27, 2006

Supporters of converting wastewater into drinking water gained a long-awaited note of support Wednesday when a City Council panel touted a recent water reuse study as an important step toward building a sustainable water supply for San Diego.

After hearing widespread public testimony in support of the concept and scant opposition, members of the council's Natural Resources and Culture Committee advanced a newly released report that supports the use of treated sewage as drinking water.

The committee recommended the full City Council discuss in September six different proposals that would make that plan a reality in an arid city that imports 83 percent of its water.

Business leaders, environmentalists, bureaucrats and scientists packed City Hall's committee room to discuss the report, which suggests plans for water reuse at the South Bay and North City water reclamation plants.

Scott Alvey, vice president of public policy for the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce asked the city officials to "think outside of the box" and support recycled water.

"The reuse of water is a process that is proven," he said.

Related Links

[Sanders Wants to Flush Water Reclamation Plans \(July, 19, 2006\)](#)

One of the speakers, William Harvey, a retired chemist and Old Town resident, said that science shows that reclaimed sewage water is safe to drink. The debate should be based on facts, he said, and not left up to the fancy euphemisms and emotion that critics

use to lambaste the concept.

"I'd also like to point out the assumption that is made in some of these scurrilous editorials showing toilets," Harvey said. "You can understand that that is very difficult to dissipate that kind of information."

Critics have long derided the concept of converting wastewater to drinking water as a risk to public health and an unnecessarily expensive endeavor. Vocal opponents of the plan, such as former City Councilman Bruce Henderson, **gained support** last week from Mayor Jerry Sanders who said that the public does not want to recycle sewage into drinking water.

As the mayor's spokesman Fred Sainz said last week: "Science supports it. The mayor and the public do not."

The City Council killed a similar plan in 1999 due to public outcry, but city staff again took up the issue in 2004 and has been studying it since.

Reclaiming sewage water for human consumption is achieved through a process known in scientific terms as "indirect potable reuse" or "reservoir augmentation." Critics have taken on the more graphic "toilet-to-tap" moniker to bolster their cause.

The most ambitious plan outlined in the city's study, which would cost more than \$200 million, would allow the city to recycle more than 21 million gallons of sewage per day into both potable and non-potable water. Currently, the 1.3 million people in San Diego use an average of 210 million gallons of water per day and city officials expect that number will increase 25 percent by the year 2030.

The indirect potable reuse model involves a process known as "advanced water treatment." This process, which is being put to use in a 70-million-gallon per day plant in Orange County, treats the water through ultra filtration and reverse osmosis -- producing water similar in quality to distilled water. The treated water is then added into existing water reservoirs such as Lake Hodges or the San Vicente Reservoir and is treated once again at one of the city's existing reclamation plants.

Save for one, the members of the public who spoke to the committee Wednesday were in support of this type of plan, saying that it produced much cleaner water than the Colorado River, which currently supplies San Diego with

about 80 percent of its drinking water. The city's report states that the water produced by this process meets all local, state and federal health standards.

But Steve Bilson, CEO of ReWater Systems, a company that supports using reclaimed water for irrigation rather than ingestion, said the city's projected cost of \$200 million was a ridiculously low number and that potable water reuse is a danger to public health. He said he has been telling the city about these issues for 11 years but that his advice always fell upon deaf ears.

"That's just the way it's been. And it's been 11 years of that, and I'm really, really tired of it," Bilson said.

Councilwoman Donna Frye, committee chairwoman said the city needs to take a close look at indirect potable use and do more public outreach about the proposal. Councilmember Toni Atkins agreed, saying that it was a shame for the public to dislike the plan merely because of euphemisms -- alluding to the name "toilet-to-tap."

"I don't want to politicize this," Atkins said. "I just want an informed public."

Please contact [Sam Hodgson](#) directly with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips. Or [send a letter to the editor](#).