



September 1, 2006

We're Talkin' T2T

Since Mayor Jerry Sanders announced in July that he would oppose any plan to augment San Diego's drinking water reservoirs with treated wastewater, the Internet has been bustling with discussions about the "yuck" factor.

I don't think *The San Diego Union-Tribune* coined the term, but they certainly reinforced the catchphrase when they ran this editorial on July 24.

If you're interested, you needn't do more than type the words "toilet to tap San Diego" into Google to come up with various newspaper articles and blogs about the reservoir augmentation proposal and cases for and against such a plan.

Most of the websites -- ranging from local publications such as *The San Diego Daily Transcript* and *San Diego CityBeat* to the nationwide website Poopreport.com are quick to point out that the "yuck" factor is pretty hard to overcome for San Diegans, especially when the concept of reservoir augmentation is known derisively as "toilet to tap."

An Atlanta-based strategic planning group, Civic Strategies, posted a statement about a month ago expressing such a sentiment.

... it's not exactly toilet to tap, It's more like toilet to wastewater treatment to more wastewater treatment to more wastewater treatment to a large reservoir (hence, the "reservoir augmentation" name that advocates prefer) where it's mixed with water from aqueducts and desalination plants to yet more treatment then to your tap.

It brought up an interesting notion about the "bumper sticker mentality."

So why are ideas like recycled wastewater so hard to sell? Because they run into what you might call the "bumper sticker mentality" -- that is, opposition that can be easily stated on a bumper sticker ("No Toilet to Tap"), while the idea itself requires a 20-page treatment.

A 20-page treatment is in fact an understatement, as the city's final report -- which cost approximately \$900,000 -- is about 250 pages long.

Poopreport.com, which describes itself as "Your #1 source for your #2 business," posted a blog entry titled "Toilet-to-tap: San Diego, water, and the babble of the ignorant masses."

The technology exists to separate water from sewage, to purify it in a number of biological and chemical ways, and to recycle it into the system with no hint of its brief former life as waste conveyance. The problem is, who wants to listen to science when disgust is involved?

The City Council is expected to discuss the city's water reuse study soon after it returns from recess.

SAM HODGSON