

The San Diego  
**Union-Tribune.**

**UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL**

## **Renew the waiver**

**Don't hit consumers with \$1 billion in costs**

**September 13, 2006**

When the City Council was told in a secret session that San Diego's sewage rate structure unfairly penalized homeowners by tens of millions of dollars a year, in violation of federal and state law, Councilman Jim Madaffer was unmoved. Rather than correct the illegal rate scheme, Madaffer declared, according to the Kroll investigation: "Let 'em sue us!"

Now, Madaffer wants to pile on the backs of consumers yet another \$1 billion in gratuitous sewage costs – a stupendous amount that would do nothing to reduce sewage spills or otherwise improve the environment. At issue is whether San Diego should renew its federal sewage waiver, which allows it to operate an advanced primary treatment plant at Point Loma. Without the five-year waiver, which is set to expire in 2008, the city would have to spend \$1 billion on an environmentally needless secondary treatment plant. Madaffer says he wants to seek a waiver while negotiating to impose a secondary treatment requirement over time.

In addition to this staggering proposed outlay, San Diego is obligated to spend about \$900 million in real improvements to its sewage system in order to comply with state and federal regulations. And on top of these hefty expenditures, some City Council members want to add \$200 million for the notorious "toilet to tap" program. Taken together, the more than \$2 billion in higher sewage costs could spike homeowners' monthly bills, which already have risen sharply in recent years, by a whopping 50 percent.

The federal Clean Water Act provides that cities such as San Diego and Honolulu, which discharge their sewage into deep ocean outfalls, may be exempted from the requirements of secondary treatment. Under the city's current advanced primary

process, up to 87 percent of solids are removed. Under the much more expensive secondary treatment, up to 92 percent of solids are removed, so the difference between the two processes is negligible.

More important, from an environmental standpoint, is that San Diego has extended its discharge pipe out 4.5 miles into the Pacific, where the sewage is deposited at a depth of 300 feet. Swift currents in the deep water help disperse the effluent widely.

As a result, years of intensive monitoring clearly demonstrate there is no adverse impact to the marine environment from San Diego's advanced primary treatment process. Several times each week researchers on boats test the water, the fish life and the sediment on the ocean bottom. The voluminous scientific data compiled from this monitoring make the case that the \$1 billion upgrade hastily endorsed by Madaffer would be a complete waste.

These very convincing data also are the reason the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Regional Water Quality Control Board have been supportive of San Diego's receiving waivers in the past. Indeed, the call for abandoning the waiver now is coming not from environmental regulators, who generally praise San Diego for its efforts, but rather from vocal activists who have the ear of the City Council.

The only rationale for relinquishing the waiver is political, not environmental. We urge Mayor Sanders and the City Council to seek a waiver renewal, as the Clean Water Act allows. San Diegans don't deserve to be burdened with another \$1 billion tab.