

The San Diego  
**Union-Tribune.**

## **Water plan secretly pushed, suit says**

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**Group alleges order by council ignored**

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**November 23, 2005**

A taxpayers group filed suit against the city of San Diego yesterday, claiming that city staffers are secretly promoting a controversial plan that would convert wastewater into drinking water.

The city shelved a similar idea six years ago, after much public outcry.

Mark Mazzarella, a lawyer for the Association of Concerned Taxpayers, accused the city of running a "stealth program" to move the concept forward again despite potential health and cost concerns.

"We think they should stop until other alternatives are explored," Mazzarella said at a news conference outside City Hall, near a gushing fountain.

The city said the claims don't have merit.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a more open process," Marsi Steirer, deputy director of the city's Water Department, said of San Diego's effort to find a way to recycle water.

The idea to convert city wastewater into drinking water is steeped in controversy. Some fear the water will be tainted and cause health problems, and that only poor people will be stuck drinking it. Rich people can buy bottled water, they say.

Proponents say the water is perfectly safe and that the process has improved since 1999, when the idea was proposed.

In a nutshell, the concept works this way: Wastewater is cleansed of contaminants and then piped to a reservoir, where it's mixed with river water. Before being sent to homes, the water is treated again.

Opponents call it "toilet to tap." Or "Frankenwater." City officials call it "reservoir augmentation."

Orange County is one of the few areas that repurifies wastewater. However, critics contend, San Diego's effort would be far broader than its neighbor's.

When the City Council killed the initial proposal in 1999, it ordered that no more work be done on the project.

The lawsuit contends that the city has broken that council order and is promoting the concept behind the scenes. Libertarian Steven Currie is listed as a plaintiff, along with the taxpayers group.

"It was time to blow the whistle," said Bruce Henderson, who has attacked many city initiatives, including the downtown ballpark.

Henderson said he is acting as a spokesman for the Association of Concerned Taxpayers and is not personally involved in the suit.

Henderson also attacked the 1999 plan.

He claims that the city has not adequately considered other options – including conservation – and is setting the stage so only this particular option will be feasible.

The city has done nothing inappropriate, Steirer contends. In 2004, the City Council reopened the issue and asked that all recycling efforts, including blending treated water with reservoir water, be studied.

The city is under federal pressure to improve water use. It dumps 175 million gallons of partially-cleansed wastewater into the ocean daily, instead of finding ways to put it to use.

"If this is a stealth campaign, it's the worst one I've ever seen," said Bruce Reznik of San Diego Coastkeeper, an environmental group that supports repurification.

The city's efforts to find a way to recycle water have been the subject of several newspaper stories and public forums, he noted.

The controversy is picking up steam because an advisory panel of San Diegans recently said it supported the purification system that would turn wastewater into drinking water.

Its recommendation will soon go to the City Council's Natural Resources Committee.

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