

## **No toilet-to-tap**

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### **Special water rate hike unwarranted**

**September 8, 2008**

High gasoline prices, rising food costs and upwardly adjustable mortgage payments may be sapping your paycheck, but they have not deterred the City Council from voting today on a special water rate hike for the infamous toilet-to-tap scheme.

At issue is an untested process to take sewage effluent, treat it heavily and then dump it into the San Vicente Reservoir, the source of much of San Diego's drinking water. This would mean, quite literally, taking your toilet water and returning it to your tap. Yet advocates of the plan abhor the apt toilet-to-tap sobriquet, preferring instead to call it "indirect potable reuse."

But no matter what euphemism you employ, the project is a colossal waste of ratepayer dollars and, just as important, fraught with serious public health concerns.

Over Mayor Jerry Sanders' well-justified veto, the City Council is rushing head long to build a \$12 million toilet-to-tap demonstration plant that may or may not meet the approval of the California Department of Health, which must sign off on it. Toward that end, the City Council will vote today on a special water rate increase of 2.3 percent. For the typical homeowner, who already has been hit by a string of water and sewage increases in recent years, the toilet-to-tap assessment would amount to another \$15 a year.

And what would beleaguered ratepayers get for this costly outlay? Provided the Department of Health OKs mixing the demonstration plant's output with potable supplies in the San Vicente Reservoir, the \$12 million project would produce a trifling 1,121 acre-feet of water annually. This would be less than one-half of 1 percent of the city's annual water consumption of 245,000 acre-feet.

Meanwhile, however, even as the City Council promotes the toilet-to-tap experiment, the city is dumping into the Pacific Ocean each year up to 19,000 acre-feet of reclaimed water that is perfectly suitable for landscaping and other irrigation. This is because, under terms of a court settlement, the city must reclaim the water at the North City reclamation plant, but it has never built an adequate network of purple pipes to deliver the water to customers for outdoor use. Believe it or not, then, the city is wasting nearly 20 times as much relatively cheap reclaimed water as the hugely expensive toilet-to-tap project would produce.

A far more sensible approach would be to spend the money to extend the purple pipes and thereby produce a much larger and much cheaper supply of water than that of the toilet-to-tap scheme. But the City Council is so stubbornly fixated on the toilet-to-tap idea that it steadfastly ignores the cheaper source of reclaimed water being dumped into the ocean from the North City reclamation plan.

In a key study, the respected National Research Council has warned that converting toilet water to tap water should be done only as “an option of last resort” because “many uncertainties are associated with assessing the potential health risks of drinking reclaimed water.” Chief among these are the low levels of potent pharmaceuticals, ranging from mood stabilizers and anticonvulsants to sex hormones and tranquilizers, that are present in sewage effluent.

If the City Council heedlessly approves the rate hike for toilet-to-tap, ratepayers still will have some recourse under a sweeping state law, Proposition 218. The measure requires that the city notify ratepayers of the proposed increase and provide them a form by which they can protest it. If a majority of ratepayers return the protest cards – a highly unlikely scenario, since most ratepayers will reflexively discard them – the rate hike would be overturned.

Making good use of the 19,000 acre-feet of wasted reclaimed water from the North City reclamation plant would provide a much larger and safer supply at a fraction of the cost of the toilet-to-tap initiative. The City Council ought to face up to reality and kill the toilet-to-tap boondoggle.