

# GROKSURF'S SAN DIEGO

June 14, 2010

## **San Diego's IPR water treatment facility sidetracked by Demaio and Lightner**

Councilmembers Sherri Lightner and Carl DeMaio took advantage of councilmember Marti Emerald's absence at today's Natural Resources and Culture Committee meeting and threw a wrench into the gears of San Diego's [Indirect Potable Reuse/Reservoir Augmentation Demonstration Project](#) (IPR Project).

The IPR Project is a City Council-approved study seeking to determine whether the [Indirect Potable Reuse](#) process can be used to give San Diego an additional high-quality and reliable source of drinking water.

Months ago, the City Council [approved a contract for project management](#) for the IPR project. The next step in the project was to identify who would construct the advanced water treatment facility required for the project. The San Diego Water Department put that out to bid in February, evaluated the candidates, and in April made a selection.

A contract for the new treatment facility was on the agenda for today's committee meeting (I wrote a [preview about it](#) on Monday). It was on the agenda as a routine informational consent item that would be sent to the City Council for approval.

Marsi Steirer, Deputy Director of the Water Department (morphing into Assistant Director of the Public Utilities Department under a reorganization), was on hand to answer questions.

When Donna Frye, chairing, summarized the agenda for the day, Sherri Lightner announced she wanted to pull the item from the consent agenda because she wanted to ask questions. Shortly, she had her chance.

“What’s the difference between this facility and the one they have in Orange County?” she asked. Answer: no real difference, the same technology is used.

“Then why do we need a study if we already have that information from their facility?” Answer: because Orange County is augmenting groundwater supplies while San Diego would be augmenting reservoir water, and because the source water for San Diego’s project is from reclaimed tertiary water while the source for Orange County is from secondary treatment water. Also because of regulatory requirements.

Lightner didn’t seem to care for these answers and said she doesn’t see why we can’t partner with Orange County and have some kind of cooperative venture with them and that she’d like to see more “philosophical” background information on how that might be accomplished.

At this point, Carl DeMaio made a motion...for a continuance. When pressed to say what for, he indicated that he thinks this project needs more examination, and besides, he thought Marti Emerald really should have the opportunity to vote!

Continuing, Frye allowed that the committee would hear the people who had signed up for public comment. Obviously they had planned their comments without suspecting this untoward development, so they had to think on their feet quickly. They all opted to address DeMaio’s motion to suppress (er, continue).

Jill Witkowski and Bruce Reznik from San Diego Coastkeeper, Jim Peugh from the San Diego Audubon Society, Marco Gonzalez from the Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation, Angelika Villagrana from the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, Cary Lowe from the San Diego River Park Foundation, Amy Harris from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association, all took turns standing before the committee to plead for them not to use a continuance to impede the project.

Lightner seemed quite annoyed by the comments and at one point indignantly asked the chair, “are they actually commenting on the motion to continue?” To which Frye replied, “It sure seems like it to me. Try listening to their words.” (or something like that). Lightner obviously wasn’t pleased having the public enter the debate on the motion!

The pleas were unheeded, however, and when Frye called the vote, she was alone in voting against a continuance.

So there you have it. Even though the IPR project was vetted and approved by the City Council, DeMaio and Lightner have decided to question the premise of the project just as it’s getting under way, with questions that sound like they’re from someone who is hearing about it for the first time. Further, the stalling technique employed with Marti Emerald conveniently absent seems like immature politics, not the behavior of one with a sincere desire for understanding. Such questions, if genuine, could and should have been asked when the overall project approval was being discussed.

I don’t know if the committee will meet in July; if not, it could be August before the matter can even be sent to the full Council.

I wonder if DeMaio and Lightner will come to understand that this is not a useful way to handle taxpayer time and money. I have a feeling this would not have happened if Marti Emerald had been present.