

It's Good to Have Water

By Scott Peters

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Today, the City Council begins its discussion of water repurification at the Natural Resources and Culture Committee. Here in San Diego we get about 12 inches of rain per year and 90 percent of our drinking water from out of town. We do not call our town the "Land of Lakes."

Before I was elected, and as a result of complicated legal settlements (referred to by journalists as "minutia"), we built a massive water recycling plant in my district to make pretty clean water out of dirty water. There's a smaller one in the south, too. We partially recycle 6 million gallons per day of water so that it is clean enough to water our plants, through a "purple pipe" network that costs too much to get anyone to use it. Since we haven't been able to market our pretty clean water -- even at our low, low every day prices -- we dump the other 30 million gallons of pretty clean water back into the sewer system. Meanwhile, our supplies of drinking water are drying up and we'll need megagallons more from someplace else.

Here's a thought -- let's take that pretty clean water from the reclamation plants and filter it some more so that it's really, really clean water, clean enough to drink. Let's have real scientists do the filtering and run tests on the water just to make sure it's safe -- no cheating! It's what they do in many Third World cities like Irvine and Denver. BIOCUM and the Chamber of Commerce (they're Republicans) and the enviros (the Democrats wish the enviros -- who voted for Nader in Florida so that Al Gore could make movies!?! -- were Democrats) agree that it's a grand idea for a great new world city like San Diego. Over the past year, the water department gave plastic-wrapped sandwiches and all-day presentations to 67 volunteers as part of a many-day "public outreach" -- and after eating the sandwiches and hearing the evidence they all -- every single one -- ended up thinking that water repurification for drinking was a great idea. In my experience, 67 San Diegans do not agree on the order of the days of the week.

There are obstacles to this water repurification, sure. First, the free press, the bedrock of democracy, the ring of truth and the marketplace of ideas, reports that the city wants you to drink water directly out of your toilets. This is a mostly unpopular idea, even at my house. And if I have somehow contributed to this very understandable and reasonable misimpression, I apologize.

Second, people still listen to Bruce Henderson. I am not smart enough to understand this.

Finally, San Diegans firmly believe that the Colorado River is filled with Aquafina. Well, I went to the Colorado River to see. My 12-year-old son's favorite trip is to go with our neighbors to the river. So when my friend Dave, who grew up in Yuma, invited us for a Father's Day on his boat, we jumped. And it was really fun. We rode the powerboat up the river, where we found a sand bar and anchored. Then we floated around, water-skied, and watched the dog chase birds. It was hot --110 degrees. All up and down the river, people sat under colorful shade tents, half-submerged in the cool water, relaxing and drinking their beverages of choice -- beers, margaritas, Diet Cokes, maybe even Aquafinas.

You know what was weird? I didn't see a single bathroom, and nobody seemed to be bothered. Maybe it was so hot and people were so active that they didn't need them. I'm not sure it mattered. Upstream, there are 360 or so "Publicly Owned Treatment Works" -- 650 total permitted dischargers -- that dump their end products into the Colorado River. So the fuel, sunscreen, cigarette ashes, food residues, dog stuff and people stuff that I perceived in the mighty Colorado were probably not water quality "difference makers."

Today I make this bold political announcement: running water is good for San Diego, and we should probably keep it. There, I said it, even though Tom Shepard would have wanted me want me to check the opinion polls first. Speaking for myself and at least 100 other San Diegans, it's fine by me if my tap water is made starting with the pretty clean water from the North City and South Bay Reclamation Plants instead of with the agricultural runoff, sewage effluent and recreational water in the large ditch between the states of California and Arizona. Which is not to knock the Colorado River as a really fun place to spend a Sunday with your son, which it is.

-- *SCOTT PETERS*