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## San Diego frames water policy for the future

BY MIKE LEE REPORTER - ENVIRONMENT

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The San Diego City Council on Monday laid out an overarching strategy for meeting water demands with the unanimous adoption of a "comprehensive" water policy with the ultimate goal of giving the city more certainty over its water supply.

All nine public speakers -- from the Surfrider Foundation to the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce -- supported the document, which many described as long overdue and necessary for the city's long-term well-being. Each group could find something to love in the policy, whether it was explicit mention of repurifying waste water for human use or emphasizing public-private partnerships.

"There is no one solution for a problem this big. We must use all the tools available to us," said Councilwoman Sherri Lightner. "This policy is a critical first step in taking control of our water destiny. ... We have a lot more to do."

Council President Tony Young called it a "truly amazing" alignment of interests. He and virtually everyone else praised Lightner for managing a process that involved months of work with more than two-dozen community groups which often are at odds.

The various organizations probably won't be holding hands after the city takes the next step: developing an action plan that's expected to create political winners and losers when specific plans are prioritized for funding. Should the "purple pipe" system for recycled wastewater be expanded? Should residents pay extra for their water if they use more than prescribed amounts? Should the city invest in a desalination plant?

One of the big debates likely to be over the use of recycled water. City officials are wrapping up a months-long study of alternatives for rethinking the sewer system to make the most use of the water instead of pumping the vast majority of it to the ocean.

Lightner framed her policy as an attempt to organize and clarify guiding principals for a crucial and famously unstable resource out of a patchwork of policies that go back decades. A similar attempt in 1998 does not include implementation goals, timelines or performance measures.

"None of these policies addresses the current challenges we face" such as climate change, Lightner said.



Workers for a San Diego contracting firm install a water-conserving drip irrigation system in the seaside gardens of a La Jolla home. JOHN GIBBINS • U-T

The document approved Monday also is short on details, but it calls for them to be developed with help from a task force that will address goals, priorities, timelines and benchmarks. That panel is expected to include about 14 people nominated by interest groups and councilmembers. It's expected to form early next year.

"We see this (policy) as a list of options, and the implementation plan as a list of priorities," said Julia Chunn-Heer with the local Surfrider chapter. She said the clean-water advocacy group will seek representation on the task force as long as it's not weighted against environmental interests.

The chamber also supported Lightner's plan and is expected to remain involved in the process.

"The policy takes into consideration the need for conservation and the use of technologies to acquire water within and outside of the San Diego region," Paul Webster, the group's vice president of public policy, said in a September letter to the council. "The policy also addresses the city's need for greater cooperation and forming partnerships among businesses, the city, and water agencies."

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