

KPBS

POLITICAL ANALYSIS: THE LEGACY OF TOILET-TO-TAP

By Maureen Cavanaugh, Gloria Penner
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MAUREEN CAVANAUGH (Host): Just last week, the San Diego City Council gave the go ahead to a water recycling pilot project. The project will recycle sewage water to drinkable standards. The idea of water recycling has been a hard sell in San Diego. The fate of the idea seemed doomed just a few years ago when the proposal received the damning title of 'toilet to tap.' Here to explore the political fallout of that unfortunate name, and how the issue has been reborn in San Diego is my guest, KPBS Political correspondent Gloria Penner. Good morning, Gloria.

GLORIA PENNER (KPBS Political Correspondent): Good morning, Maureen. What a luscious subject to start the day off with.

CAVANAUGH: Well, you know, there has been enormous opposition in years past to water recycling in San Diego. When have city officials tried to introduce this idea before?

PENNER: Oh, I can track it back to 1989, that's 21 years ago, when a city ordinance mandated the widespread use of recycled water. And then it was hot again in 1998 when the city grappled with the issue and it became an issue in several closely contested city races, and that's when project opponents developed slogans to get negative public response. So in 1999, the city council voted to halt the recycled water project when it was surfaced—and this was the key—that there was certain stakeholder groups unfairly targeted to use the purified—the so-called purified—water. In other words, there were allegations of racism. Yes.

CAVANAUGH: In what sense?

PENNER: In what sense? That the water would be sent to areas of the community where minorities live.

CAVANAUGH: Oh.

PENNER: Right.

CAVANAUGH: And what year was that that...?

PENNER: Oh, that was 1999. And then 8 years later, in October 2007, there was lots of debate, public discussion, you know, we were concerned about the drought. The city council voted to approve it's called the Indirect Potable Reuse project, indirect meaning the water wouldn't go directly into our homes, it would be going into reservoirs and aquifers for purification. Potable meaning drinkable. Reuse, water is being reused. And then a couple of weeks later, Mayor Sanders vetoed the resolution and then about, oh, a month later the city council voted to override the mayor's veto. This is all in 2007. And then a year later, in November '08, the city council approved a temporary water rate increase to fully fund the demonstration project and then last year, the PUC, the Public Utilities Department, not PUC, Public Utilities Department issued a request for proposals and then in January of this year, the city council directed the mayor to execute an agreement between San Diego and a group called the RMC Water and Environment to perform public outreach on this, project management and on and on. At the June 16th meeting, a city council committee issued the contract to build the facility. It was blocked from going to the full council because council members Sherri Lightner and Carl DeMaio still had objections to the basic premise of the project. And then on July 31st, a special follow-up meeting took place to address those questions. Sherri Lightner didn't even show up for that meeting. Carl DeMaio didn't ask any questions, and only reiterated that he remained steadfastly opposed. And then a few weeks (sic) later the project was approved by the full council. That's the history.

CAVANAUGH: And that's a long history...

PENNER: It is. It is.

CAVANAUGH: ...in San Diego. Now one of the big bumps in that history, Gloria, was when the plan got dubbed toilet to tap. Tell us how that happened.

PENNER: I had to do some interesting research and I finally came up with it. It came from a man named Gerald Silver. He was an angry Encino homeowner's association president who used the phrase in 1995 during a debate over IPR, again IPR is the Indirect Potable Reuse project, and that was in Los Angeles. So there was a debate and somehow he came up with it. You know, I don't want my water going from my toilet to the tap. And it quickly became the term that most opponents used to refer to the idea of IPR. And then in San Diego when the plan was put to public review in 1998, all that – 12 years ago? 13 years ago? Angry

protestors including then—get this—city council member George Stevens, Assembly member Howard Wayne, who’s running for political office this year, and former San Diego City Council member Bruce Henderson, they used the term to state their opposition to IPR and it was born again in San Diego.

CAVANAUGH: That name practically destroyed the issue in San Diego.

PENNER: It did. Yeah.

CAVANAUGH: Where did the opposition to this idea of water recycling, what prominent figures – you just named a few but have there been others in the community that have just really resisted the idea of water recycling?

PENNER: Well, I think the one that we really need to look at is Mayor Jerry Sanders. He has restated his opposition to using treated sewage to supplement San Diego’s drinking water supply and he said that he would oppose any effort to bring about toilet to tap. He says if there’s neither—this was a while back—there’s neither the money nor the public will to support such a program. And when you have the mayor of the city taking that position, that’s really all you need. For almost two decades San Diego has debated this. Water officials at the San Diego County Water Authority, local water districts within the county, academics, private business experts, they all agreed that the reuse of water for drinking was safe and affordable and necessary. But there was the yuk factor, you know...

CAVANAUGH: Umm-hmm.

PENNER: ...associated with the concept of drinking treated sewage water and the belief by many—and this still continues—that trying to blend sewage water into the drinking supply is a recipe for disease and a public health disaster.

CAVANAUGH: One of the outlets in our city, the San Diego Union-Tribune, was very, very relentless and vocal in its opposition to this idea of water reuse, this toilet to tap project that we heard about over and over again.

PENNER: Yeah, they ran an editorial a number of years ago. It said your golden retriever may drink out of the toilet with no ill effects. Yuk. But that doesn’t mean human beings should do the same. San Diego’s infamous toilet to tap plan is back once again, courtesy of water department bureaucrats who are prodding the city council to adopt this very costly boondoggle. And that was from the Union-Tribune. So you had the major newspaper and you had the mayor and this was powerful.

CAVANAUGH: There were some people who spoke up in support of this, in fact during this most recent – the city council meeting about the water recycling plan, Councilwoman Donna Frye said she’s been speaking out for water recycling since she was 9 years old. There were a number of people who came out in support of these earlier recycling proposals.

PENNER: Well, yes. Absolutely. The city attorney then, Mike Aguirre, was very much in favor of it. He felt that it was needed to bolster the reservoirs. He urged the public, he urged elected officials to embrace it. He said, right now the City of San Diego is facing a water crisis—this is about two years ago—and we’ve entered into a period of uncertainty. We know there will be substantial cutbacks in water supplies beginning in the spring. And I think what he was talking about was, remember the federal judge’s ruling to limit the amount of fresh water that could be pumped from the San Joaquin River in an effort to protect the delta smelt, an endangered fish. And so when he said, you know, we are facing a water cutoff threat and keeping us in the system in which we’re dependent on imported water from faraway sources is not a prudent approach.

CAVANAUGH: Right.

PENNER: And I’ve got a copy here of a memo that he wrote to Mayor Jerry Sanders dated August 4th, 2008, in which he wrote I’m writing to ask you to please explain your office’s behavior with regard to implementing the Indirect Potable Reuse pilot project. It was stalled in the mayor’s office. And he actually implied, maybe he went further than implying, that he was concerned that the mayor’s office may be frustrating the city’s council (sic) desire to pursue the project because of close ties to Poseidon resources. Poseidon is a project to desalinate water and put that into the water supply. He said it’s been suggested, this is Aguirre, that IPR is viewed as competition by Poseidon. So he is basically pinpointing the mayor and the mayor’s office relationship with Poseidon.

CAVANAUGH: Not only did there – was there political intrigue involved in the earlier versions of this water recycling proposal, but you talk most specifically about the yuk factor, the idea that people think there’s just something wrong with the idea of sewer water being able to be retreated up to drinkable standards and yet there has been some psychological work done about how communities can introduce this idea by – and get over that initial gut reaction.

PENNER: There's been psychological work done, certainly, and then there's been, you know, very basic work done. I kind of favor the rationale of a sixth grade teacher who would take his sixth grade class to waterways to discuss nature and water and life cycle of all living things. And he said, I would have them look at the life in the water and think about the water they were playing in or drinking. I would remind them that the water they were studying was the same water—get this—that the dinosaurs had once drank and lived on. All water is recycled and the same water that was around 5 million years ago is still with us. There's no such thing as new water. I mean, if that concept can get into sixth graders and stick there, then they won't look at their toilet water with such horror. Some of the methods for making reclaimed water more palatable are to design systems that purify water in people's minds through association with environmental organizations like the Sierra Club, and taking advantage of emotions' power over reason. One way is by incorporating a short stretch of river in the water recycling plant. It gives you a clearer, cleaner picture. Or by injecting treated water into an aquifer. Here's a case in point. Residents of cities on the Rio Grande River in South America do not give much thought to the fact that a town directly upstream is discharging processed waste water almost directly into their water intake.

CAVANAUGH: And I know that up in Orange County they put their recycled water into the aquifer to kind of take the edge off the idea that, indeed, it's being recycled.

PENNER: Well, the way they do it in Orange County and they do it in El Paso and they do it in Tucson and many other western communities where water is scarce, is that the water agencies recycle by dumping treated effluent on the ground so that it can soak in and recharge the aquifers and after that water's been underground for a while, it's then pumped up for drinking water use. So it is used that way.

CAVANAUGH: Well, back here in San Diego and back last week to a very different city council vote where water recycling was approved and one of the most amazing things about that meeting was that no one spoke against the plan.

PENNER: This is true. And that's probably because an unusual coalition of people came together. There was Judy Swink of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3. She says, here we are 33 years later still dumping it. Environmental groups like Surfrider and Coastkeeper, now they joined with Amy Harris of San Diego Taxpayers Association. That is an unusual coalition. And she basically said, it's a sobering fact the San Diego region cannot sustain these water rate increases and continue to import the amount of water that we do. So there was the financial

factor. And Donne Frye, the city councilwoman, joked that she'd been, as you said, fighting for full water recycling since she was 9 years old. But Councilman Tony Young was one of those who said he has only just come around to the idea so that people like Marti Emerald were careful to point out that public education is a key element of the demonstration project, and it really is. And the two councilmembers that still are resistant, Carl DeMaio, Sherri Lightner, they don't think that they're ready to vote for it. Lightner doesn't want to see water recycling put ahead of other strategies to tackle a future water shortage.

CAVANAUGH: So does this mean that we've heard the last of toilet to tap, do you think, Gloria?

PENNER: Well, it will depend on whether groups that oppose it, groups that might have a financial stake in not wanting to see it happen, if they can mobilize and come together in the kind of powerful coalition that I was just talking about. But remember, this is a demonstration project, that's all it is, a pilot project. And I think it's going to depend on the results of that pilot project and whether the outreach allows it to be sold to the public in a way that the public can really embrace it because I know when I'm out there, Maureen, I'm speaking to people and I tell them, you know, one of the projects I'm working on is looking at the history of this and the politics of it. They still look at me and say, yuk.

CAVANAUGH: Still have a ways to go.

PENNER: Yes.

CAVANAUGH: I want to thank you so much. I've been speaking with Gloria Penner, KPBS political correspondent and host of Editors Roundtable and San Diego Week. Thanks, Gloria.

PENNER: You're welcome. Thanks to you.

CAVANAUGH: I want to let everyone know that tomorrow morning we will have a full discussion about the city's newly approved water recycling pilot project right here on These Days at 9:30. Now coming up, we'll hear the trials and tribulations of making rules for the English language. That's as These Days continues right here on KPBS.