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Aguirre questions Sanders' 'behavior' on water plans

Mayor's 'close ties' to company cited

By Matthew T. Hall
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SAN DIEGO – City Attorney Michael Aguirre questioned Mayor Jerry Sanders' “behavior” toward two plans to boost San Diego's water supply yesterday, choosing his words carefully more than a year after calling the mayor corrupt.

Aguirre suggested Sanders is embracing one conservation approach over another inappropriately, delaying the City Council's plans to pursue a pilot project to turn treated wastewater into drinking water because of “close ties” to a company touting an alternate technology to desalinate ocean water.

Poseidon Resources will appear before the California Coastal Commission tomorrow seeking approval to build a plant in Carlsbad to desalinate 50 million gallons of ocean water a day. Sanders called it “a critical project for our region” last week at a news conference with six other local mayors.

Aguirre's three-page memo to Sanders yesterday begins, “I am writing to ask that you please explain your office's behavior,” and later says it “appears questionable in light of the direction given by City Council.”

Aguirre concludes, “You cannot take on the appearance of lobbying for private firms, such as Poseidon.”

Online: Read City Attorney Michael Aguirre's memo at uniontrib.com/more/documents.

He notes a series of connections between Sanders and Poseidon:

- Three Poseidon officers each contributed \$300 to Sanders' first election campaign.
- Sanders' campaign manager, Tom Shepard, is president of a firm that lobbies for Poseidon, and a Sanders campaign staffer once employed by Shepard now works for Poseidon.
- A city staff e-mail questioning the council's water project was copied to Shepard by a Sanders aide.

Sanders acknowledged yesterday that he has resisted the idea of recycled wastewater, a project defined by critics as toilet-to-tap. But he said he is “still moving it forward” per the council's wishes.

Sanders said that his relationship with Poseidon revolves around “good sound water policy in the county of San Diego” and that he and Shepard haven't discussed Poseidon but that if they did, there wouldn't be anything wrong with that because the company isn't doing business in the city.

“I have looked far and wide, and I have not found a single campaign consultant that would drop every single client they have to work with me,” Sanders said.

The council voted to move ahead on a “demonstration project” at the North City Water Reclamation Plant last year, overriding a Sanders veto, but cost is now an issue. Sanders wants to raise sewer rates to fund the council-approved project, but Aguirre says that's unnecessary.

Aguirre and Sanders have sparred repeatedly over the years, most notably in June 2007, when Aguirre called the mayor corrupt for his role in a campaign contributor's construction of an office tower in Kearny Mesa whose height exceeded federal safety regulations. State Attorney General Jerry Brown cleared Sanders, at the mayor's request.