



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

The Nipomo Community Services District has a low-flow toilet on display in the lobby of its office.

Water-saving qualities of low-flow toilets debated

NIPOMO

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In what's shaping up to be a war over water, not even the low-flow toilet has been safe from potshots in Nipomo.

"Multiple-flush toilets, we call them," said Nipomo Community Services District Director Michael Winn.

In discussions of water conservation, residents have been asking whether the touted, new-model toilets really save water or if the need to "double flush" negates any savings.

"I'd rather have the old toilet than the one I have to flush three times," said Winn, whose home is retrofitted with water-saving fixtures.

The debate is lighthearted. But it could help shape the future of water conservation efforts on the sprawling Nipomo Mesa, where The Woodlands — the biggest development in county history — is undergoing a final round of scrutiny focused on the availability of water.

As a condition of approval, PH Property Development Co. must come up with a county-approved water conservation program.

County officials initially suggested a massive retrofit project that would require the developer to replace as many as 5,000 old-model toilets in existing homes on the Mesa with modern, water-saving models.

That could mean a big water savings. Newer toilets use only 1.6 gallons per flush, compared to the 6 or 7 gallons used by some older models.

But performance of the low-flow toilet has been called into question in public discussions.

"You have to flush it more often," said Larry Vierheilig, a member of Nipomo's advisory council. "In essence, (water) use is about a wash."

Woodlands developers are looking at newer water-saving options within the project, such as a conservation education program, the use of moisture detectors in the soil to cut down on irrigation and monitoring of pipelines and irrigation ponds for leaks.

The Nipomo Community Services District — which has challenged The Woodlands on a number of water-related issues — has doubts about the effectiveness of some of the proposals. The district has an aggressive retrofit program that requires developers to install low-flow plumbing fixtures — including shower heads, faucets and toilets — in older homes.

Several agencies in the county have similar programs, and officials say they've been so successful that older toilets are disappearing.

Overall, water savings have been impressive, officials say. For example, Grover Beach — which expects to be completely retrofitted by 2005 — uses as much water today as a decade ago, even though the city's population has increased by about 5,000 people.

And while conservation experts acknowledge there were problems with early-model toilets, they say those bugs have been worked out. The new models, they maintain, should not require a second flush.

Woodlands developers haven't ruled out toilet retrofits, though they question whether there are even enough older toilets on the Nipomo Mesa to make a program feasible.

"If it comes down to it and there's no other way, we might have to do it," said John Janneck, spokesman for the Woodlands project. "But I think the other systems people have had a certain amount of success. I only wish the whole South County was doing as much as we're doing."