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Nipomo eyes deal to buy water

City agreed to buy 3,000 acre-feet of water, but officials say not enough to support 6,000 homes, officials say

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NIPOMO - Within a few months, the Nipomo Community Services District could enter into an agreement to buy as much as 3,000 acre-feet of water from the city of Santa Maria.

That's enough to serve roughly 6,000 homes.

If the district goes ahead with the purchase, that could allow more development in a community that's already leading the county in growth.

Officials aren't talking cost at this point. But a study done two years ago estimated that Santa Maria water would cost the district between \$1,000 and \$1,200 a year per acre-foot, and that construction of a pipeline between Nipomo and Santa Maria would cost several million dollars on top of that.

Nipomo is now totally reliant on the Santa Maria groundwater basin. The basin's ability to meet long-term needs of both farmers and household and commercial users has been a concern for years, and is the subject of a major water-rights lawsuit.

The district looked into several sources of supplemental water, including desalination.

Buying water from Santa Maria -- which has a big entitlement to the State Water Project and has shown a willingness to sell its surplus -- appeared to be the simplest alternative.

After two years of negotiations, Nipomo officials hope to bring a contract for Santa Maria water before the services district's board of directors in the spring, according to district General Manager Doug Jones.

For now, though, the district isn't doling out water to new projects that aren't already in the community's growth blueprint -- in large part because it's awaiting the outcome of the water lawsuit. That litigation could limit the amount of groundwater that can be pumped from the Santa Maria basin.

That lawsuit started in Santa Maria when a group of farmers challenged the city's right to store state water in the basin. (The basin is actually the underground aquifer. Farmers and municipal users pump water from the aquifer.)

Because the basin extends into the South County, several San Luis Obispo County agencies were drawn into the suit as well, including the Nipomo Community Services District.

The trial, under way in San Jose, is expected to wrap up next week. But it could take a few months for the judge to issue a written ruling.

Until that ruling is out, the Nipomo district is closely guarding its existing water supply.

On Wednesday, a developer who wants to build 48 homes on a 4.4-acre lot currently zoned for just four homes walked away empty-handed.

"If we allow everybody to put in 40 homes instead of four homes, we're going to run out of water," said district board member Bob Blair, who is generally considered the most pro-growth among the panel.

Instead of denying the project, though, the board delayed a decision for 90 days, to allow time for the court ruling.

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