



Santa Maria Times

Pulitzer Central Coast Newspapers

Print Page

Thursday, May 5, 2005

Last modified Wednesday, May 4, 2005 11:54 PM PDT

Nipomo water compromise on the table

By Kirsten Flagg/Staff Writer

A compromise plan that stops just short of declaring a state of emergency for the Nipomo Mesa's water supply will come before the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors next week.

A vote Tuesday could resolve an extended debate over what role the county should take in approving developments that could threaten Nipomo's water supply.

The recommendation that the county planning staff sent to the supervisors Wednesday reads much like a compromise between the competing interests of community members, water providers and developers.

If approved by the supervisors, the recommendation could potentially stall some residential construction by requiring large developments to buy-in to the Nipomo Community Services District's bid to obtain water from Santa Maria.

"Overall my goal is not to go where the impact is so great that you will impose a moratorium," said 4th District Supervisor Katcho Achadjian. "Because if you get to the point where everything comes to a stop, you have actually no momentum to generate any level of activity to bring solutions to existing problems."

The county's Resource Management System provides for three "levels of severity" that can be applied to any one resource and used as a planning tool. Last year, the planning staff recommended - and the Planning Commission voted to endorse - a severity level 3 for the Nipomo Mesa's groundwater supply.

After the supervisors voted in November to reject that decision and keep the designation at level 2, to avoid a possible moratorium on building, local conservationists and the Nipomo Community Services District cried foul, saying the decision put Nipomo's water supply at risk.

In December, Achadjian moved to table the decision to allow time for meetings to clarify the impact of all options on development, on the health of the basin and on the NCS District's plans to acquire Santa Maria water.

All reports prepared by county staff regarding Nipomo's water supply have been clear about one point - the Mesa's groundwater is in danger.

On average, Nipomo pumps out more groundwater than can be naturally replenished every year, which leaves the basin vulnerable to a destructive intrusion of sea water.

In technical terms, groundwater extraction in Nipomo is exceeding the basin's "maximum safe yield."

The county's policy states that "Level 3 occurs when the capacity (maximum safe yield) of a resource has been met or exceeded," which means that the staff recommendation of Level 2 actually contradicts the county's own definitions of severity.

The contradiction results from an attempt to avoid another county policy - any Level 3 designation requires either a complete moratorium on building or the preparation of an expensive environmental impact report (EIR) for every development needing county approval.



Kirsten Flagg/Staff In the future, subdivisions like this Knollwood housing development near Highway 1 and Callendar Road on the Nipomo Mesa might first have to buy into the Nipomo Community Services District's effort to import supplemental water from Santa Maria.

"I think we were trying to take a practical approach," said John Hand, the supervising planner who prepared the report. "And it looked to us as though (this recommendation) was the best chance we had of getting something adopted that would have a real impact."

That impact would come from a proposed stipulation that county approval for all general plan amendments and land divisions would depend on developers agreeing to purchase supplemental water.

Most likely, that would mean buying into the NCSD's purchase of water from Santa Maria. The NCSD hopes to have that water on tap within two to three years.

Hand acknowledged that virtually all new significant development in Nipomo results at some point from either an amendment or land division, but those already in the process would not be affected by the change.

Furthermore, developments would be allowed to start the permitting process now - which can also take two to three years - but would not be allowed to begin construction until the NCSD had signed a contract to build a pipeline from Santa Maria.

"I can't sit here today and say when is the supplemental water going to be approved and a construction contract signed," said Jerry Bunin, government affairs director for the Home Builders Association of the Central Coast. "So, yes, we're definitely worried about (that), but this is better than where we were with Level 3."

Though the NCSD was also encouraged that it wouldn't have to absorb its estimated \$6 million supplemental water project on its own, general manager Michael LeBrun said the Level 2 recommendation contained too much compromise, not enough fact.

It's as if the report is saying "even though we recognize that (the threat to the basin) is there, it's real, we didn't like the medicine and so we're going to close our eyes and pretend we don't have the sickness," said LeBrun. "We've been down this path with the county before. We had a stronger staff recommendation back in December and we ended up with something that the district didn't find palatable."

* Staff writer Kirsten Flagg can be reached at 739-2206 or by

e-mail at kflagg@pulitzer.net.

May 5, 2005