

NCSO board debates merits of Nipomo pipeline project

By Randi Block/Staff Writer

Reeling from the news that estimates have now exceeded \$24 million, the Nipomo Community Services District board reviewed Wednesday the latest engineering report on its proposed pipeline project.

For the past five years the NCSO board has been investigating the feasibility of building a pipeline from Santa Maria to Nipomo to pump water into the community, where growth has long been restrained by lack of water.

During a three-hour report, the directors slogged through updates on every aspect of the project, ranging from necessary permits to pipeline size, before getting to the crux of the issue - whether the new price is prohibitive.

“This has shock waves that go down the line,” said Director Mike Winn.

Officials originally estimated the pipeline would cost \$6 million to install.

Director Larry Vierheilg said he wanted to review cost estimates for other supplemental water projects, such as desalination or taking water from Lake Nacimiento, before agreeing to Nipomo's pipeline.

“I can't say this is the best way to go unless we can look at all options,” he said. “Maybe we need to change directions - I don't know, but we owe it to our ratepayers to investigate it.”

Estimates were derived for three different pipeline routes with costs ranging from \$24.4 million to \$26.7 million, all of which are in 2006 dollars, said Mike Nunley of Boyle Engineering, the company that is doing the pre-design work on the project.

However, they all include a 30-percent contingency rate that can absorb some inflation, he added.

The directors did not delve into a full discussion of how they could pay for the project, but are scheduled to talk about it more 10 a.m. Dec. 6 at the NCSO office, 148 S. Wilson St.

Along with the cost estimate update, General Manager Bruce Buel also gave the board a timetable for completing the project, assuming a financing source is secured. The environmental impact report, which will need to be recirculated based on changes in project design, should be certified by fall 2007 with construction finished by late 2009, Buel said.

Money isn't the only hurdle that the pipeline project must clear before it can move forward. Since there are several endangered animals and plants in the construction area, near the Santa Maria River, numerous agencies will have to certify the plans.

Early studies have shown evidence that California red-legged frog, steelhead trout and California Coast horned lizard are among the endangered species that live in the area.

Therefore, permits have to be obtained from the Regional Water Quality Control Board, Caltrans, both San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, Santa Maria and the Air Pollution Control District.

The directors also reviewed more details about the pipeline's four route alternatives - two of which run east of Highway 101, one of which is attached to the highway and the western route, which would run north from Blosser Road in Santa Maria.

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