

NCSO says no to well test request

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

A developer's request to have the Nipomo Community Services District contract for a pumping test, using the developer's money, on a well on South Thompson Road has been turned down.

Directors voted 4-0 to deny the request from Bob Russ for a 72-hour test on an agricultural well near the corner of South Thompson and Rancho roads.

President Mike Winn recused himself from the discussion Wednesday to avoid a potential conflict of interest, because he lives across East Knotts Street from the property, known as Nipomo Hills, where the well is located.

The request not only didn't win the favor of the four directors, but also drew objections from four audience members who urged the board to reject it.

Russ, whose family owns Falconcrest Builders LLC, said the development company is already in escrow for purchase of the 88-acre property, where previous development proposals have also met with opposition.

"I hope the results (of the pumping test) would be known before the close of escrow to determine if this makes sense or not," Russ said of the plan to buy the site and develop up to 50 homes.

Russ said if the well on the site could produce 44 acre-feet per year, any amount not used by the housing development would be allocated to NCSO as a "supplemental water" source.

NCSO General Manager Bruce Buel estimated 50 homes would use approximately 30 acre-feet per year. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or the amount of water generally considered to supply the annual needs of four to 10 people in an urban environment.

In exchange for the "supplemental water," Russ asked that the district negotiate a "will-serve letter" to provide water and sewer service to the homes that would be developed on roughly half the site.

That half lies within the urban reserve line and district's sphere of influence; the other half, which is not, would remain in agricultural use.

Russ and district staff indicated having the district contract with Fugro West for the well test might give it more credibility as an independent test than if Falconcrest contracted for it directly.

But public opinion at the meeting was against the proposal, with four speakers questioning the characterization of the water as "supplemental," saying the water would come from the same groundwater basin that's already in overdraft.

"If the Mesa is truly in a Level 3 severity, can it now kick in additional water to the Nipomo Hills property if the well does not hold up over the long haul?" asked Donna Mehlschau.

Mark Moore of C&M Nursery said other wells on the east side of Nipomo are already failing, noting a well drilled at a subdivision at North Thompson and Chestnut Street was "ultimately a dry hole."

“Wells on the east side are going dry on a regular basis,” he said. “There's been a substantial decline in water availability on the east side. ... All the wells are severely depleted.”

Burt Fugate of Fugate Farming Co., who grows 72 acres of irrigated lemons adjacent to the Nipomo Hills property, expressed “deep concern for the availability of groundwater for growing lemons and other citrus.”

“Groundwater is irreplaceable,” he said. “We have no other sources.

Fugate noted his nearby well, which once was rated at 300 gallons per minute, hasn't produced that much in 16 years, and now yields only 90 gallons per minute.

Director Ed Eby said the fractured rock geology of the groundwater basin holds less water than the sandy soils on the west, and when the water supply is depleted, it happens suddenly.

“The well on the Patterson property produced ... for about a growing season, then suddenly stopped,” he said. “... I worry we would be legally responsible for providing water (to the development) for the rest of its life.”

Eby also said a 72-hour test wouldn't prove the well's long-term production. That would require a one-year test, which would waste water, he said.

Vice President Larry Vierheilig, presiding in Winn's absence, noted the property would have to be annexed to the district, and that would require it bring with it a supplemental water source.

“I think, first, we would need a legal ruling on whether this is truly supplemental water,” Vierheilig said. “Based on the geology, it probably

isn't.”

Vierheilig advised Russ to see if he could recover some of his escrow costs.

“I'd recommend ... you not touch that with a 10,000-foot pole,” he said.

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