

NCSO sets water pipeline project in motion

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

A \$19.8 million plan to pipe supplemental water to Nipomo from Santa Maria was set in motion Wednesday by Nipomo Community Services District directors.

In a series of votes, directors approved the project's objectives and concept, a request for proposals to design the system and an agreement to prepare the environmental impact report.

If all goes according to the proposed schedule, the contract to design the project could be approved by the end of June, and construction could begin in mid-2009, with the system online by fall 2010.

The price tag for the entire project could reach as high as \$35.8 million.

As planned, the project will be built in three phases, although the first two phases could be combined and the third phase would be optional.

Phase 1 would bring 2,000 acre-feet of water per year to NCSO's system via a 24-inch pipeline from the north end of Blosser Road under the Santa Maria River to Joshua Street, tying into the district's water line along Orchard Road.

That volume would meet the existing demand for supplemental water, according to a report from Boyle Engineering.

The second phase would boost the volume to 3,000 acre-feet per year, enough to meet the demand at full build-out of the South County Area Plan in 2026.

"I think the notion of going to build-out at 2026 is wishful thinking. They'll change it as soon as they get near it," said board President Mike Winn,

referring to the county and its General Plan. "We'll see that many people long before we get to 2026."

The total cost of the two phases is estimated at about \$19.8 million. Operation and maintenance costs are pegged at \$230,000 a year.

Phase 3, which at present is optional, would boost capacity to 6,300 acre-feet per year — at a cost of \$16 million — to supply annexed land now within the district's sphere of influence.

The environmental impacts of all three phases will be evaluated by Douglas Wood & Associates Inc. of San Luis Obispo, the same company that started preparing an EIR when the pipeline project was first approved in 2006.

That project was brought to a halt when the estimated costs skyrocketed from about \$6 million to \$24 million.

But after reviewing alternatives — including tying into the State Water Project and building a desalination plant — the district decided to relaunch a revised version of the pipeline project as the cheapest and quickest method able to deliver the required volume of water.

The cost for Wood to prepare the original EIR was set at \$113,100. The cost for an EIR on the new project is set at \$94,260, and Wood expects to deliver the document in six months.

"Six months to do an EIR, in our world, is Herculean," said Director Ed Eby, noting some data will be salvaged from the original EIR work and Wood knows "time is of the essence."

"I think this is a good price for a fast project," Eby said. "The big task here is not so much writing the EIR as defending it."

Director Larry Vierheilig initially disagreed, considering Wood would use some data from the original work.

“I think it’s kind of high,” he said. “I don’t want to delay things, but I think this could go out to a (request for proposals).”

But Donald Wood told the board his company only performed the first six of 10 tasks and noted the study will have to deal with a number of new biological issues, including facilities that will be near the habitat of the endangered red-legged frog.

“The pipeline under the river is about the only thing in common with the old project,” Wood said. “Basically, it’s a new project. Also, we’ll be starting over with Step 1. The only real information we’re carrying over is some of the base conditions.”

In addition, he noted the EIR would address construction of the project in three phases. The first EIR addressed a one-phase project.

The project will meet a number of objectives, including slowing the depletion of groundwater above sea-level to reduce the potential of sea water intrusion as agreed to in the recent Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin litigation, which also requires management of the Nipomo Mesa Management Area of the basin.

In addition to reducing pumping from the basin, it will augment water available to The Woodlands project and the Golden State and Rural Water companies that also supply water to certain areas of the Mesa.

It will also meet the county’s requirement that supplemental water be brought into the area before NCSD can annex any more land within its sphere of influence.

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PIPELINE ESSENTIALS

n Water delivery from the first two phases: 3,000 acre-feet per year, enough for about 6,000 families.

n Optional Phase 3 delivery: 6,200 acre-feet, enough for projected full build-out in 2026.

n Cost for the first two phases: \$19.8 million

n Cost for all three phases: \$35.8 million.

n Annual operation and maintenance cost: \$230,000