



Opponents say pipeline won't solve issues

By Mike Hodgson / Associate Editor / mhodgson@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Monday, June 27, 2011 12:05 am

Opponents of the proposed supplemental water pipeline from Santa Maria launched their campaign last week with the first of a series of meetings.

More than 100 people gathered in the Mesa Middle School gymnasium June 16 to hear members of the Mesa Community Alliance offer their analysis of what they say is an unnecessary project.

The meeting coincided with the mailing of a Nipomo Community Services District brochure that says the Mesa's groundwater basin faces the threat of saltwater intrusion, so a supplemental water source is necessary.

"It's pretty, but it doesn't say too much," MCA spokesman Larry Versaw told the crowd as he held one of the brochures aloft. "We don't have thousands of dollars to hire a PR firm, but what we do have is facts, and we want to share (them) with you."

The meeting focused on issues for customers of Rural Water Co., which serves Cypress Ridge and other nearby areas.

Future meetings are planned for customers of Golden State Water Co., which serves the south end of the Mesa, and Woodlands Mutual Water Co.

Although there is no official membership roster, MCA consists of a core group of seven people plus others who serve as contributing resources, Versaw said.

"It's very informal," he explained. "There is no leadership structure, no requirement for anybody to sign up or pay dues. But we've found we work together pretty effectively."

He said the members include engineers, a management analyst, an attorney and others from all areas of the Nipomo Mesa.

While some members might say the group was formed specifically to oppose the pipeline, Versaw said that's not the case.

"We came together to try and give a voice to the whole Mesa about some of the issues we might be confronted with," he said. "The first thing we came across was the (pipeline), so that was our first focus."

Their goal is not only defeating the proposed assessment district to pay for the \$25.3 million project but also petitioning the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors to intervene and find a regional solution to water issues.

To pressure the county into taking action, the group is collecting signatures on petitions to be presented to the board.

A fictional crisis

"This is a really complex issue, and we know it is," Versaw told the crowd at the first meeting. "It's difficult to distill down to one presentation."

But simply stated, MCA members believe the pipeline will not provide additional sources of water and is unnecessary, unreliable, excessively expensive and unfairly funded.

Members say NCSO is creating a fictional water crisis — using scare tactics to make residents believe the groundwater basin is in imminent danger of saltwater intrusion.

Bill Petrick, a registered professional engineer, disputes the district's claim that the groundwater level is dropping, which could lead to saltwater intrusion.

Petrick said the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin is deeper in Santa Maria than it is under the Nipomo Mesa and the even shallower Northern Cities portion.

He said the higher pressure of the deeper portion pushes water to the lower-pressure shallow areas, creating a south-to-north flow.

“As long as we have positive pressure here, we can't get seawater intrusion,” Petrick said, noting that saltwater has not been detected in the sentinel wells that monitor the western portion of the basin.

“So when the PR people come out with this ‘growing threat of saltwater intrusion,’ that's their spin, but it's not real,” Petrick said.

MCA claims that despite increased pumping to support development, the level of the groundwater basin has not dropped.

Petrick points to a chart comparing rainfall and groundwater levels over the past 35 years.

“The aquifer mirrors rainfall,” he said. “(The chart) shows our average rainfall is about 16 inches. But it also shows our water level goes up and down as rainfall goes up and down, and it's almost flat.

“One of the claims of the PR group in our famous brochure is that ... the evidence is clear we're using more water than exists in the natural water supply,” he said. “Well, I think the evidence is clear that we're not.”

NCSD officials agree the basin level mirrors rainfall, but they say the basin is reacting faster to drought and recovering slower when rain returns.

Petrick also said the courts are monitoring the basin level through the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group's reports.

He said if the level hits the point that triggers a severe water shortage condition, as nearly happened from 1990 to 1994, or if saltwater intrusion is discovered in a sentinel well, the court will step in and take over.

“If there is seawater intrusion, there is a 10- to 20-year time lag before it reaches the production wells,” Petrick said. “So again, don't listen to the scare tactics. Listen to the scientists.”

Excessive cost

Petrick said something that should scare the public is the amount of money MCA claims the pipeline project will cost over a 30-year period.

“This story is about a pipeline, and it's going to be expensive,” MCA member Pat Eby told the crowd at the meeting. “But the most expensive thing about it is the cost of the water that will move through it for 30 years.”

Eby pegs that total at \$400 million.

She said the capital cost of the pipeline will be \$80 million, which includes the construction, the cost of floating the bonds and the interest they will accrue, while the cost of operation and maintenance will be \$52 million.

But the total cost of the water over the 30-year term will be \$268 million, which she bases on Santa Maria's charge of \$1,443 per acre-foot plus a projected 5 percent increase per year.

NCSD puts the charge at about \$1,300 per acre-foot.

MCA members also believe it's not fair that those who use half the water on the Mesa will foot the entire bill for the pipe-line and the water it carries.

Private, unregulated wells pump about 5,500 acre-feet per year. ConocoPhillips pumps about 1,200 acre-feet per year — a guaranteed allowance — and that number could rise if the refinery is expanded.

NCSD pumps about 2,560 acre-feet, Golden State about 1,290, Rural Water about 880 and Woodlands about 810 acre-feet.

The four purveyors and their customers will share the cost of the project even though the water will go only to NCSD,.

Woodlands and Golden State have emergency interties with the district's system, but Rural Water does not.

Other alternatives

MCA members believe there must be better alternatives than the pipeline, and they think the expertise of the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group should be brought to bear to find those alternatives.

NCSD officials point out, however, that the technical group's three annual reports say the pipeline should be built as quickly as possible.

MCA members also point out the pipeline is not absolutely mandated in the lawsuit settlement. The judge in the case ruled the pipeline can be removed from the agreement if its construction proves infeasible.

"The court did retain jurisdiction over this whole matter and did leave the door open that ... if things change, which they have, the court could be petitioned to change the conditions," Versaw said.

NCSD general manager Michael LeBrun said that's not an option at this point.

"We, the purveyors, would have a hard time going to the court right now and pleading to remove this because we haven't done anything on it yet," LeBrun said.