

Nipomo revs up pipeline efforts

District is pushing a plan to bring water from Santa Maria, but it is facing local opposition



By Cynthia Lambert | clambert@thetribunenews.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This story has been updated to include links for information on the water-shortage publicity campaign and opposition to the Santa Maria water pipeline project.*

Every day, when residents on the Nipomo Mesa fill up their coffee pots, irrigate their lawns or take a shower, they're using water that comes from under their feet.

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Nipomo residents rely on water from an enormous underground aquifer that covers a surface area of about 256 square miles and serves parts of southern San Luis Obispo and northern Santa Barbara counties.

And, local officials say, more water is being pulled from that source under the Nipomo

Mesa than is being replenished.

With that in mind, Nipomo Community Services District officials have been working on a multimillion-dollar project to bring extra water from Santa Maria to Nipomo through a pipeline.

The project was nearing construction about a year ago. Design plans were about 95 percent complete, and district officials hoped to move to the next step: funding.

But the plans stalled after polling of local residents in April found many residents didn't know a water shortage existed and a majority of people wouldn't vote to pay for the pipeline — though most respondents said having an adequate drinking supply was a top concern when compared with other local issues.

The poll was a reality check for district officials, who launched a public relations campaign in response.

"Our community is facing a serious water shortage," reads one mailer sent to local residents. "We must act soon."

District officials say the pipeline is necessary to reduce the area's dependence on the underground aquifer and to prevent saltwater intrusion — the pollution of a freshwater aquifer by seawater creeping underground and moving inland.

"If we can't get this done, then we sit here with the supply and availability we have," district General Manager Michael LeBrun said. "This is a very serious situation."

But as the district's campaign continues, a group has become more vocal in its opposition to the project.

The seven-member steering committee of the Mesa Community Alliance disputes some of the district's key points and wants San Luis Obispo County to become involved in a regional solution that might include the Five Cities area. Copy of document found at www.NoNewWipTax.com

"They're spending their time and money trying to scare us about saltwater intrusion," local

resident and former Grover Beach Councilman Larry Versaw said of the district.

Alliance members have been circulating petitions that urge the county to “initiate and facilitate a better, most cost-effective, broader solution.” So far, they have collected 300 to 400 signatures.

Meanwhile, other local communities that pull some water from the aquifer, including Arroyo Grande and Pismo Beach — have told county supervisors they support the district’s project. Grover Beach council members have asked for more information before they make a decision on whether to support the project. On Wednesday, Oceano district board members will discuss whether they will support the pipeline.

Impact of settlement

Over the past 20 or so years, various projects to bring extra water to Nipomo have been studied and discarded, from building a desalination plant to tapping into the state water pipeline that runs through Nipomo.

A pipeline pushing water from Santa Maria to Nipomo was eventually identified as the cheapest and quickest solution, though the cost jumped from a 2004 estimate of about \$6 million to \$25.3 million today. A state grant is expected to cover \$2.3 million; the rest could likely be funded through an assessment district of about 8,000 parcel owners.

The project is also required by a 2005 settlement over water rights in the Santa Maria groundwater basin, which stretches from Santa Maria to Pismo Beach.

The settlement stipulates the Nipomo district will purchase water from Santa Maria. The three other water purveyors on the Mesa — Golden State Water Co., Rural Water Co. and Woodlands Mutual Water Co. — also agreed to purchase a portion of their supplemental water, though they may not use much, or any, of it.

In the next six to nine months, the parcel owners will likely have a chance to vote on whether they’d support forming a property tax assessment to fund the construction cost. LeBrun said Wallace Group, a district consultant, is updating the cost projections for parcel owners based on their property size, land use and other factors.

In 2009, the district estimated the project would cost Nipomo residents \$10 to \$20 a month for the capital costs over a 30-year period, and an additional \$17 to \$30 a month for the ongoing operation and maintenance.

The district will also have to pay for the cost of the water, currently at about \$1,450 an acre-foot. (An acre-foot generally serves two to five households per year, depending on landscaping, location and family size.)

The district has already spent \$3 million on environmental work, design and outreach, LeBrun said. Most of the money came from fees paid when a home is connected to the district’s water delivery system.

Mesa Community Alliance members argue the district is not telling residents the project’s true cost.

“The only thing they say is it’s \$25 million for the pipeline,” said Pat Eby, a local resident and management analyst for the Monterey County Workforce Investment Board. “That’s only the start.”

Eby has estimated the cost of the pipeline and 30 years’ worth of purchasing water from Santa Maria, including a projected 5 percent increase each year, at upward of \$300 million.

LeBrun said he hopes to have updated cost projections within the next few months.

The pipeline project would move as much as 3,000 acre-feet of water a year up Blosser Road in Santa Maria and under the Santa Maria River to connect to a water tank in Nipomo. Another three miles of pipeline would be installed along South Frontage Road, Southland Street, and South Oakglen and Orchard avenues to connect to the existing system in those areas.

The water delivered to Nipomo would be the same type of water that Santa Maria customers receive: a blend of groundwater and state water.

The city's discharge requirements for its wastewater treatment plant require the city to use a blend of at least 50 percent state water. Currently, the city is delivering to its customers 95 percent state water and 5 percent groundwater, said Santa Maria Utilities Director Rick Sweet.

"We'd serve as much state water that was available at that time," he said.

Debate over water wells

The Mesa Community Alliance group also argues the Santa Maria supply won't be reliable in times of drought because state supplies could be limited and the project pulls additional water from the groundwater basin that would flow to Nipomo naturally.

They also assert that increased water usage has not affected the overall well levels, which have risen and fallen in conjunction with how much rainfall the area received.

Well levels "are a concern, but it doesn't mean there is going to be this immediate rush of seawater," said Bill Petrick, a nuclear engineer and Mesa Community Alliance member.

However, Nipomo district board member Ed Eby (who is of no relation to Pat Eby), said district officials can't predict when seawater intrusion might happen.

"How long do we have? We don't know," he said. "You can't wait until you have the problem manifest itself. It's just our responsibility to provide reliable water to our residents."

Groundwater elevations in general under the Nipomo Mesa area increased slightly in 2010 over 2009, but several key wells have seen declining groundwater levels since 2000, according to the latest annual report by the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group, a committee established by the groundwater litigation settlement.

The group found that potentially severe shortage conditions continue to exist — and have since 2008.

The technical group also recommended the pipeline project be brought online as soon as possible.

Learn more

Click here to learn more about the Nipomo pipeline project. Once there, click on "water shortage news".

Learn more about the Mesa Community Alliance and its concerns at mesacommunityalliance.com or at www.nipomowaterfacts.com.

Reach Cynthia Lambert at 781-7929. Stay updated by following @SouthCountyBeat on Twitter.

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Sean Shealy

Interesting topic.

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SLO

Nipomo could have prevented this problem if they had just adhered to the growth controls put in place years ago. But they got greedy and saw \$\$ in their eyes and allowed out of control building. Residents have watched for years the Trilogy area waste water so they could build homes that are still standing empty and a golf course that hardly anyone uses. Nipomo used to have control of how many homes were built on an acres, But Developer's were given the ok time and time again to increased density. So now we are stuck with salt water intrusion and they want us to pay for it! Isn't it the same for all of California; they pass bills then raise our taxes to pay the costs of implementation! Enough already!

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coastconnection

Actually, the majority of the residents of Nipomo were against this project as there were 2 conflicting reports on water availability from this aquifer. But the county in its wisdom decided to go forward and now the residents are paying for this overdevelopment.

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cacoastguy

Nipomo isn't incorporated, so residents living in the area didn't make the decision to allow development. The County allowed this problem to occur.

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