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## FIVE CITIES NEWS

Forum outlines pipeline project for Nipomo  
By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

About 150 people turned out last week to get information, ask questions and comment about a proposed pipeline to carry supplemental water to the Nipomo Mesa from Santa Maria.

Nipomo Community Services District representatives outlined their view of the water problem, options for solving it, the “right solution” and how much it will cost during a two-hour forum Nov. 9 in Nipomo High School’s Olympic Hall.

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Audience members were allowed to submit written questions on cards before, during and after the presentation.

District representatives then answered some before allowing people to verbally comment on the project.

Representatives said questions not addressed at the forum will be answered on the district’s website, along with a PowerPoint presentation used at the forum.

Director Ed Eby told the audience at Nipomo High School that the problem is Nipomo Mesa has only one source of water — the groundwater basin.

He said the area is using twice as much groundwater than is replaced by rainfall, with the average level in eight key wells falling 40 percent from 2000 to 2008.

Eby said if the groundwater falls below sea level as a result of pumping, the basin could be infiltrated by salt water, poisoning the wells.

“If we do nothing about the water shortage we’re facing, there will be extreme consequences in the future,” he said, citing a loss of wells, extreme water rationing and a prolonged shortage leading to falling property values.

He pointed to seawater intrusion that started in 1985 in Los Osos, resulting in six lost wells as saltwater advanced two miles inland.

Director Mike Winn said NCSD has been studying the problem since 2004, spending \$3.1 million looking at options.

Those include conservation, state water, a building moratorium, a desalination plant, recycled water, several pipelines and collecting rainwater.

Winn said almost all the options have problems, ranging from not supplying enough to taking too long to develop to costing too much.

“I think in any long-term plan, we must have desalination,” Winn said. “Is that the answer in the short term? No.”

He said the only project that meets the criteria of bringing in a minimum of 2,500 acre-feet of uninterrupted “new water” a year as soon as possible at the lowest cost with minimal purification is the pipeline from Santa Maria.

General Manager Michael LeBrun told the crowd the total cost of the project is about \$25.2 million, with \$2.3 million of that covered by a state grant.

Bonds would be used to finance the project, with those paid off over 30 years using money raised through an assessment district — if the affected property owners approve.

Properties would be assessed based on assigned benefit units, and owners would have the option of paying in one lump sum or over time, LeBrun said.

Lump sums paid by customers would be \$3,100 to \$4,100 for NCSD, \$1,600 for Golden State Water Co., \$5,650 for Woodlands Water Co. and \$2,500 for Rural Water Co.

For those who choose to pay over time, the monthly costs would be \$22 to \$30 for NCSD, \$13 for Golden State, \$44 for Woodlands and \$20 for Rural Water customers for 30 years.

Customers then would pay an additional amount on their water bills for the cost of the water. LeBrun said for NCSD customers, that would be about \$2 per month.

LeBrun said a report on assessments is expected in early 2012. Ballots could be mailed to property owners in March, with the voting to close around May 9.

Property owners will get one vote per benefit unit assigned to their properties. If the assessment district is approved, pipeline construction could begin next summer and be completed by 2014.

Following the meeting, members of the Mesa Community Alliance, which opposes the project, said NCSD representatives offered nothing new.

“Unfortunately, they’re still resorting to made-up facts and deception on the need for the thing,” MCA member Bill Petrick said.

He also said NCSD’s numbers for the monthly water costs don’t match the numbers MCA has come up with using the same data.

MCA member Pat Eby, no relation to NCSD Director Ed Eby, also cited the costs and questioned the district’s water supply data.

“Ed Eby says we are using 50 percent more water, and (Director) Mike Winn says we have reduced our water use by 20 percent through conservation,” she said. “What’s up with that?”