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Nipomo needs water

Look into the \$25.3 million project CSD officials must sell to residents

BY COLIN RIGLEY

A Nov. 9 meeting about Nipomo's water problems began with a warning: Beware the white handouts.

People walking through the door at the community meeting organized by the Nipomo Community Services District were met with a barrage of handouts, only one of which actually came from the CSD. That white sheet the CSD members warned about was compiled by the group No New Wip Tax. "Wip" in this case stands for the "Water Intertie Project," a plan put forward by Nipomo's water leaders to purportedly save the burgeoning town from growing pains it's brought upon itself for the last two decades.

And their best plan, if only because it might be the only option they have left, is to buy state water the town voted against taking in the '90s—twice.

Nipomo is teetering at the edge of exhausting its available water resources, officials say, and on the verge of collapsing into an all-out water catastrophe. And the community appears poised for a public infrastructure scuffle on par with the Los Osos sewer project or failed attempts by Paso Robles to have its residents pay for the city's Nacimiento Water Project debt.

Nipomo CSD officials sound almost desperate in their arguments to the community. What they're asking for is voter approval to build a \$25.2 million pipeline from Santa Maria and bring with it 2,500 acre-feet per year of supplemental water in the first phase of build-out, with plans to ultimately bring 6,000 acre-feet per year. The CSD has already spent \$3 million since 2005 to prepare a project design—which is about 90 percent complete—and get ready to go to voters.

It's a tough plan to sell, to say the least.

"I don't think it's fair that Joe Blow from Kokomo can move here and I should have to give him water," said one woman at the Nov. 9 meeting, who said she's lived in the area for more than two decades.

Santa Maria bought into the state water project that Nipomo residents voted against. But the pipeline carrying that water literally passes through the town. In effect, Nipomo residents will be buying water that runs under their feet, and paying for a new pipeline to bring it back to them. Yet, the pipe is too small for Nipomo to patch into directly.

No one seems completely thrilled by the idea, including CSD board members. But all the other options are either too expensive, or too far off. Since 2005 the town has been under a court order to find additional water. Two decades of essentially unchecked development has put the town's groundwater table in danger of overdraft and has sucked water levels so low that officials worry seawater could at any moment break into the town's only available water source.

Residents, however, remain skeptical. According to CSD Director Michael Winn, residents have floated ideas ranging from innovative to insane: towing Arctic icebergs, desalination, and collecting fog, for example. Other more practical ideas, like conserving the available water and curbing new development, are already in place. However, the town outgrew itself too quickly—county officials allowed new golf courses and housing developments despite questionable groundwater supplies in the past—and even with limits on development, the town could be pushed over the edge. Other proposed solutions, like desalination, could come down the line, but won't solve the immediate problem, according to the CSD.

"Everybody's in favor of a moratorium that starts the day after they moved here," Winn told a room of about 200 grumpy residents on Nov. 9.

Groups like the Mesa Community Alliance and No New Wip Tax say the CSD is exaggerating the problem and trying to shove down residents' throats a project that's too expensive and shortsighted.

"We're disputing the conclusion that NCS D came to that this is the only solution, and it's cost effective, so we have to do it," said Bill Petrick of the Mesa Community Alliance.

The crux of the issue, however, seems that some people worry increasing the town's water supply is a sure way to entice more development.

"They call this 'supplemental water,'" Petrick said. "And by any standard definition of supplemental water, this isn't it."

That white sheet distributed by the No New Wip Tax group also claimed the CSD is trying to buy more water than the town needs.

Such criticism is precisely what CSD officials and other water purveyors—Woodlands Mutual Water Company, Golden State Water Company, and Rural Water Company—will have to overcome.

Every delay will cost more money. Project costs have jumped 10 percent since May 2009, according to a district staff report. But if all goes as planned, the district will fund the project through a combination of reserves and, primarily, through assessments on existing ratepayers—but it's a big if.

A ballot is expected to go out in February 2012. Each property owner will be asked to pay a weighted amount based on the size and water use of their property. For the average resident, their share of the \$25.3 million project will equate to about \$20 extra per month. Here's the kicker: In order to pass the assessment, the district needs 50 percent plus one of every property owner to vote yes. Assuming 50 percent of the property owners return a ballot, and they don't all vote in favor, the project's funding plan will fail.

"It's a big hurdle," CSD General Manager Michael LeBrun told *New Times*.

For now, officials say the intertie project is the best available option. And while the water table is free of seawater, there's still some wiggle room. But according to LeBrun, if seawater intrudes on Nipomo's only available water supply and they don't have something else lined up, "Boy, the stakes just got cranked up."

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Copy of document found at www.NoNewWipTax.com

'I don't think it's fair that Joe Blow from Kokomo can move here and I should have to give him water.'

a speaker at the Nov. 9 water meeting

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