

## **NCSD stops processing water service applications**

*By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor*

Faced with no immediate source of supplemental water, Nipomo Community Services District has stopped processing applications for intent-to-serve letters.

Directors last week unanimously approved a resolution that suspended application processing after property owners voted down funding for a supplemental water pipeline two weeks earlier.

The inability to obtain intent-to-serve letters will essentially bring development to a halt within NCSD boundaries.

District General Manager Michael LeBrun said the staff will still accept and file applications but will not collect the application fee nor process them.

“By policy, the board must find we have sufficient excess water to serve new projects for us to issue intent-to-serve letters,” LeBrun said.

“The board for a number of years relied on the fact that supplemental water would be forthcoming to make that decision,” he continued. “It can no longer make that finding of excess water to deliver service.”

An intent-to-serve letter is a quasicommitment that the district will connect a property to the water system if an applicant meets certain conditions.

A letter is usually good for four years and requires evidence a developer or property owner has made preliminary development applications to the county.

NCSD has been issuing the letters under an allocation system with a yearly limit on the quantity of “new” water the district will commit to provide.

Intent-to-serve letters differ from will-serve letters, which commit the district to actually providing a property with water service.

LeBrun said the district’s directors would have to make some very significant findings to be able to withdraw will-serve letters.

The board directed the staff to bring back information on how many intent-to-serve letters are already being processed and how far along they are.

The staff also was directed to provide the number of will-serve letters that have been approved but that applicants have not exercised by having meters set and water delivered.

LeBrun said the district has about nine intent-to-serve letters outstanding, but each of those letters represents multiple water connections.

About 267 will-serve letters, which represent individual connections, have been issued but not exercised, he said.

Although the decision will halt development within NCSD's boundaries, it won't have any impact on development in other areas of the Nipomo Mesa.

It's unknown whether the Mesa's three privately owned water purveyors will stop providing new service connections or whether the county will prevent property owners from drilling their own new wells.

Directors said they want to know the spring groundwater levels as measured by the county in April before deciding to take further steps to reduce water use.

They also are concerned about the potential impacts of imposing mandatory conservation.

LeBrun noted urban water use accounts for only 50 percent of the groundwater pumped on the Mesa, and NCSD only pumps 50 percent of that.

"If the district cuts back significantly while others continue on pumping and there's seawater intrusion, the courts could say, 'OK, nobody can pump more than they are today ever again,'" he said.

While property owners voted down an assessment district to pay for the pipeline, the district hasn't given up on finding a second source of water.

In fact, NCSD and fellow water purveyors are required to find another source by the court stipulation in the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin lawsuit.

So last week the board appointed directors Ed Eby and Mike Winn to a subcommittee that will consider other supplemental water options and identify funding sources.

LeBrun said those supplemental water options could include a scaled-down version of the pipeline, which might preserve the \$2.4 million grant allocated to it by the Department of Water Resources.

"We spent \$4 million developing this (pipeline) project, and that exhausts the district's supplemental water fund," LeBrun said.