

Viewpoint: Fiscal, environmental cost too high

Valerie Bentz

What are we getting for the \$733,000?

The Cambria Community Services District (and the Army Corps of Engineers) has plans to drill up to 10 sites and install several test wells at Santa Rosa Creek where it enters the ocean at Shamel Park, which is estimated to cost \$733,000. This expenditure is likely to lead to a desalination plant, which will lead to further expenditures (estimated at over \$21 million.) The testing will have impacts on the environment, as will the potential desalination plant. The "Proposed Negative Declaration" filed by the CCSD on Jan. 14 woefully underestimates the potential and known environmental damages from the proposed test drilling.

I object to the testing, on grounds of the *heart* — the effects on the life, human, plant and animal. I also object on the grounds of the *head* — that is, of the cost, when other solutions would cost less and have less negative impact. Since the approximately 3,800 residences in Cambria use about 75 percent of the water, the cost for the testing to each residence, if divided up, would be \$145.

Points of the heart

Thousands of sea birds depend upon the estuary for water, food and respite. The sand bar at the mouth of the creek creates a lagoon where many species of fish breed, which in turn feed birds, otters, wildlife and us.

Construction of test wells and a desalination plant will increase the levels of toxins on the beach, in the ocean, our air and in our water. Toxic mercury from old mines would likely be released and become highly toxic when it comes in contact with oxygen. Leaks from equipment and pollution from their engines threaten our air and land.

Over the long term, should a desalination plant be installed, a large plume of salt and at least 25 known carcinogens would be spewed out into the ocean, resulting in a dead area in the ocean and continued contamination. Sea water contains pollutants which would have to be counteracted by the process.

Reasons of the head: Fiscal irresponsibility of the plan

The proposed desalination project is sized to allow for every household to use 18 units bimonthly. Our actual average per household use is about nine units bimonthly. Why? Such excess production is costly.

CCSD hasn't told us how much we can expect our water bills to go up. Because they will go up. A California Department of Water Resources estimate from 2003 on the cost of desalinated water said it may range between \$1,160 to \$1,600 per acre-foot of water, much more than the current cost to pump from the creeks. Cambria uses an average of 60 acre feet per month, about 700 per year. One acre-foot is approximately 326,000 gallons, or 436 CCSD units. The average family uses about .19 acre feet per year.

This translates into a cost of \$58,000 (50 acre-feet at \$1,160) to \$128,000 (80 acre-feet at \$1,600) a month for Cambria, or a cost to the average household for water of between \$29 and \$64 per water bill.

I experienced a doubling in water bill while living in Santa Barbara in the '90s after they built a desalination plant. The plant is no longer in service due to high maintenance and operation costs.

Of course, these figures are estimates. However, my conversations with a water engineer indicate that, if anything, they are underestimated, due to the cost overruns of such mammoth projects.

Fiscally responsible solutions

What makes the desalination project even more problematic is that there are less costly solutions:

- Thirty to 50 percent of water used by Cambrians could be saved by installing grey water systems in each home, at a cost of between \$500 for a minimal system to an average of \$4,000. About 1,466 homes in Cambria could have the minimal grey water system installed for just the cost of the testing!
- Expand the rebates program, about to run out of the measly \$2,000 allocated for Cambrians to install low-water usage toilets.

- Conduct water audits by a professional, which would include installing low-flow fixtures, establishing detailed water usage in Cambria, providing education about conservation, and maintaining an awareness throughout the community about the urgency for conservation. All residences in Cambria could be audited by hiring three auditors for three months which would

cost approximately \$24,000. If all residences in Cambria had up-to-date, water-friendly toilets and fixtures, we could save 40 percent or more of our water usage, without changing any of our habits!

- Look into developing ponds or storage tanks up Santa Rosa Creek. (Dr. Jim Brownell conducted such a study, available in the Cambria Library, largely ignored!)

- Install an updated wastewater recycling system. A local plumber estimated that the current system uses over 50 percent more water than an updated, ecologically superior system would require.

- Improving the sewage treatment plant to provide recycled wastewater (also known as reclaimed, tertiary standard, California Title 22, ("purple pipe")) could save two to three units per month for each household.

In conclusion, there are too many reasons, both of the heart and the head, to go ahead with the costly test drilling at our precious Shamel Park, or with the plan for building a desalination plant with so many better solutions available.

Do not let fear or greed rule the day.

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