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Cambria Community Services District Race Splits Along Desalination Lines

By Catherine Ryan Hyde

Recently I've taken to calling Cambria "the new Los Osos," a reflection of the division in both communities. In Los Osos, the dreaded buzzword is "sewer." In Cambria, it's "desal." As with the Los Osos sewer, the end costs of desal may not be truly known going in, and the ability of lower-income Cambrians to pay for future services is not assured. Here's the difference, as this reporter sees it: Los Osos needs a sewer, so the argument is more about what sewer and where, as there are not many alternatives to sewers. But those who say "Cambria needs desal" really mean "Cambria needs water." And there *are* alternatives.

The Cambria Community Services District says it researched those alternatives and deemed desal the most viable option. Whether or not Cambrians agree with this assessment depends on their knowledge of the alternatives and/or their trust in their own CSD. And those familiar with recent board meetings have heard CCSD directors themselves openly admit to serious trust issues between citizens and the board.

Even in the face of such trust issues, surprisingly few Cambrians seem to know that the president of the Cambria CSD, Greg Sanders, has brought what many feel is a potential conflict of interest to the district. According to a [Press Release](#) by the Ralph Nader-inspired Public Citizen, a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization, "As both a member of the CCSD Board of Directors and as a partner in the law firm of Nossaman, Gunther, Knox Elliot LPP, Mr. Sanders presents a potential conflict of interest. Both he and his firm stand to benefit financially if the project agreement is approved and the desalination industry gains momentum in California."

There was some flap about this press release when Mr. Sanders was first elected to the board. But today, going into a new CCSD election, this Cambrian (I can't speak for any others) never ceases to be amazed by how few people seem to even know about it. It seemed it would not be an issue in the upcoming election anyway, because Greg Sanders has chosen not to run for a third term. He filed, then shortly afterward withdrew, citing health concerns. But his cryptic [comment](#) about how he would continue to be around, and his quiet introduction of two candidates to a private lot owners group have led some to wonder if it bears repeating.

Mr. Sanders' withdrawal, combined with the retirement of Director Peter Chaldecott, leaves open two seats on the CCSD board, with no incumbents in the race. And, predictably, the race is shaping up cleanly along desal lines. Vying for these two seats, in an election crucial to Cambria's future, are Valerie Bentz, Jim Bahringer, Harry Farmer and Mike Thompson.

First, the desal candidates:

Mike Thompson's brochure makes only one reference to water. Under "Mike's Positive Vision for the CCSD Board," he lists, "Determine best method to solve future water shortage issues." He responded to my email request for more information by saying, "The elected Board has voted unanimously to explore the feasibility of moving forward with desalination as the alternative water supply source. I agree with that decision and feel that the testing of environmentally sensitive wells (as compared to open ocean intake) is necessary to determine if a desal plant using water from those wells is possible. Without this information one cannot make an informed decision on desal or other possible solutions to our water shortage issue." Mr. Thompson's [website](#) is "new and under construction" as of this writing.

When asked about his views on desalination by [The Cambrian](#), Jim Bahringer said, "I'm open to talk about anything, but I think we should move forward on investigating desal." By email, he expanded his position with this quote: "I

believe that we both want to see salmon run up our streams [author's note: they never did before] but I remain unconvinced that desal cannot be compatible with that goal. The assertion that Cambria's Desal effort will have material effect on ocean salinity is particularly intriguing given that the initial environmental study determined that this design will contribute a temporary [sic] local increase of salinity of less than 1%. Our subterranean discharge [author's note: though a sub-surface intake system is being sought, the plant is not yet designed and no discharge system has yet been detailed or proposed] will mitigate much of brine the threats [sic] noted in the open ocean discharge system cited. Given the vast impact of fresh water resulting from melting ice packs the argument seems specious." When writing back, I noted that I was unaware of any melting ice packs in the Cambria area. Mr. Bahringer does not appear to have a website.

Apparently Mr. Bahringer, Mr. Thompson, and Greg Sanders recently attended a meeting of the United Lot Owners of Cambria (UnLOC), a lobbying group comprised of mostly out-of-town lot owners on the CCSD water wait list, some of whom have threatened to sue the district if they are not allowed to build their proposed homes. The [invitation to the 2010 annual meeting](#) states that CCSD president Greg Sanders: ". . . will bringing [sic] two new CCSD candidates, Jim Bahringer and Mike Thompson, that [sic] we may want to consider supporting."

This seems to align them more firmly with desal and the current CCSD board than their campaign literature would indicate. Plus, it raises some concerns based on the fact that, with a few exceptions, the UnLOC group is not comprised of current Cambria voters. This invites a troubling question. If UnLOC can't vote for the candidates, then what support are they offering?

I asked both Mr. Bahringer and Mr. Thompson how they would answer those who feel their scheduled appearance at the UnLOC meeting reflects a stronger alignment with desal than their campaign statements reflect. In a phone call with Mr. Bahringer, he declined to answer any questions about the UnLOC meeting. He later emailed me and stated, "I remain interested in ALL viewpoints and hope to be responsive to all constituents' ideas including those of unloc. [sic]" I sent another email, asking my question again, and noting that the members of UnLOC are not currently his constituents. As of this writing I have received no reply. Mr. Thompson said, "I was invited to attend and because they are a constituent group in this community I was interested in hearing their views . . . I listened to them just as I listen to other citizens who approach me at Farmer's Market to present their views on various issues. I am interested in understanding all aspects of the water issue which I will have to deal with as a member of the Board. I will continue to hear the concerns of UNLOC as well as all the other citizens of this great community." Again I wrote back to make the important point that most UnLOC member are not yet citizens of this community, and will not vote in the upcoming election. I was hoping to clarify what support (since not votes) was at stake, but apparently I will have to leave that as an open question.

Now on the environmental side:

Though Valerie Bentz and Harry Farmer are not running together, and there is no affiliation between their campaigns, both are concerned about the environment. Both are endorsed by the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Valerie Bentz states her position as follows: "I am opposed to drilling without an environmental review and opposed to desal unless it is shown to be the most economical and environmentally sustainable water source we can have, which does not seem to be the case." Ms. Bentz is known to locals for her February 2010 [Viewpoint article](#) in The Cambrian newspaper, tackling the desal issue from the point of view of both the heart (concern for the Cambria environment) and the head (fiscal irresponsibility of the plan). Much more information about Ms. Bentz can be found on her [website](#).

Harry Farmer is more directly opposed to desal, and more openly critical of the current and recent boards. In a July 2010 [Viewpoint article](#) in The Cambrian, he stated: "Personally, I am deeply concerned and troubled regarding how the entire desalination process has been addressed in the past decade. Especially as all these years of a declared water shortage little to no effort has been made by the district to promote and encourage viable, cost-effective, environmentally friendly alternatives as a way to help address our water concerns." Much more information about

Mr. Farmer is available on his [website](#).

Hopefully the foregoing illustrates how cleanly the race has split along environmental and desal lines.

The often-quoted assessment "Cambrians want desal" may be in flux. Cambrians want a more dependable source of water. Who can blame them for that? For years they've been told that desal is the answer, that the alternatives are not viable, that impact on the ratepayer will be "absolutely minimal," that the project will have "no negative impact on the environment," and that much or all of the funding will be federally provided. On that basis, what's not to like? But if a survey were held today, I think current Cambria residents would be fairly effectively split, the gap narrowing as more information about the financial and environmental costs of desal—as well as horror stories of the lack of reliability of many existing plants—becomes known.

This only adds fuel to the fire of the upcoming election, because elections make news, evoke speeches, and spark debates. This may be Cambria's chance to explore the facts of desal in a way that reaches and informs many more locals. Assuming a fully informed electorate, this coming November will indeed have a great deal to say about where Cambrians stand on desal. But at this point in time, with five out of five CCSD board members strongly pro-desal, I feel it's fair to say that Cambrians have heard more from the "pro" side.

Hopefully the next few weeks will serve to educate the electorate as never before. Still, it seems there may be only a fairly small segment of swing voters. Those strongly for, or strongly against, a desal plant in Cambria appear entrenched in their positions. For them, the ballot choices are immediately clear.

Finally, here's a question potentially worth pondering: if "Cambria wants desal," why does not one single candidate's flyer/brochure proudly proclaim "I am for desal?"