

Thursday, Jul 22, 2010

Posted on Thu, Jul. 22, 2010

Viewpoint: Openness, answers needed on desalination

Harry Farmer

Many thanks to Catherine Ryan Hyde for her thoroughly researched and thought-provoking letter to the editor (July 15, "Aussie rates doubling") regarding the numerous problems many cities have had that built desalination plants as a way to deal with their water needs.

The negative experiences other communities have encountered should certainly be cause for concern regarding the proposed desalination facility that has been strongly encouraged by our Cambria Community Services District in the past decade.

On numerous occasions in recent months, members of our community have spoken during public comment at CCSD meetings, asking for real, substantiated proof as to the effectiveness of desalination claimed by the district, as well as positive examples of cities that had implemented desal.

The response has always been that Cambria's desalination project has been thoroughly researched, and proven to be the best alternative to meet our water needs. This would then be followed by brief, vague, anecdotal comments as to the positive experiences some cities have had.

Any criticism of the district and its claims have been dismissed by the board, being described as the needless concerns of a very small but vocal minority who certainly do not represent the majority of Cambrians. Strongly voiced concerns as to the financial and environmental costs of desalination have been disregarded; requests for an environmental review, especially of the drilling of test wells in front of Shamel Park, have been dismissed as unnecessary.

A public forum has been called for. I have twice done so, recommending that experts on both sides of the issue could present evidence, where other water alternatives could be examined, that the public be given the opportunity to ask questions, voice their concerns, and be given real and substantial answers regarding the fiscal and environmental costs of the desalination project.

My requests were not even acknowledged.

So imagine my surprise when I was recently watching the June 24 CCSD meeting on Cable Channel 21. Shortly after a brief discussion of financial concerns regarding the desalination project, including Director Allan MacKinnon's observation about funding from the Army Corps of Engineers as being, "up in the air," the following took place.

Director MacKinnon stated that, among folks he has talked with in the community, that there are, "a lot of misconceptions regarding ... desal." He then added, "A project that you have going before a board, you would have a pretty good picture as to what you are going to do."

Yet there is, "so much we are leaving out ... people are very concerned ... I hear it more and more. We need to be more transparent, telling the folks exactly what we are going to do."

Board President Greg Sanders replies, "I couldn't agree with you more." Soon after, he remarks, "the project must be defined very specifically." Moments later Sanders states, "I'm going to suggest ... that we go the extra step. I think the board needs to have some community meetings. We need to bring people in, we need to solicit input, we need to have an education process, not only for the community, but for us as well (emphasis added), so we all know what's involved"

Excuse me. Have I missed something? Haven't legitimate requests for more complete and thorough information been recently voiced by concerned members of our community? Hasn't the need for public debate also been advocated, all dismissed by Sanders as unnecessary? Hasn't the board already claimed it has the needed information regarding the desalination project proving its efficiency and effectiveness, while also claiming that funding would be provided by various governmental agencies, so— no need to worry, no cause for concern.

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.

The district, and the board, exist to serve our community in a responsible and knowledgeable manner, endeavoring to meet Cambria's water needs with openness, integrity and commitment. Finally we can see some evidence of this surfacing regarding the desalination project. Let's hope this continues.

Longtime Cambria resident Harry Farmer, an astrologer, gardener and environmental activist, is a candidate for the Cambria Community Services District Board of Directors.