

# Who sells desal by the sea shore?

*A proposed desalination plant is at the heart of Cambria's CSD election*

**BY MATT FOUNTAIN**

The decades-old fight over water in Cambria is coming to a head. Progress toward a proposed desalination plant, touted by community officials as the best option for a supplemental water supply, could take a dramatic shift depending on the outcome of the upcoming election.

Two spots have opened up on the Cambria Community Services District (CCSD) Board of Directors, just as the federal government wraps up test well drilling on the Cambrian coastline. For the first time in years, residents resistant to building a plant have two candidates running who share their concerns.

Four candidates are vying to fill two vacancies on the CCSD board. Current Vice President Peter Chaldecott is not seeking re-election, and current two-term President Greg Sanders dropped out of the race in July, citing health concerns.

If the election is representative of the community as a whole—and some say it is—the diametrical nature of the candidates reflects divisions within the community over the project. On one hand, there's Jim Bahringer and Mike Thompson, who support the desal plant; the other two, Valerie Bentz and Harry Farmer, both support further investigation into environmental impacts from, and alternatives to, desalination.

With test well drilling already under way, the next two years may prove to be crucial to the project's completion. The election of two anti-desal candidates may shift the historically pro-desal board, after two of the three remaining board members, Muril Clift and Frank DeMicco, endorsed the pro-desal candidates.

Bahringer, a Cal Poly professor and Cambria business owner, told *New Times* because of a "perfect storm" of factors such as current and potential federal funding and the "enviro-friendly" factors of the plant such as subterranean intake, he sees the next two years as critical in moving the project forward.

"It really depends on federal stimulus funds. Right now we have a complete [Environmental Impact Report] for the project being funded by federal money, and because of that, we can continue looking at alternatives," he said. "But why not seize this opportunity?"

Cambria businessman and Chamber of Commerce director Thompson, who has also expressed support for the desalination project, could not be reached for comment.

Bentz, a professor of human and organizational development at Fielding Graduate University, said she's running because no alternatives for storing water have been pursued other than the desal project, which she said may have major environmental impacts and would end up a long-term fiscal drain on residents.

"The current board has been pursuing desal like a rhinoceros, running straight toward it no matter what the costs, and people who are speaking up are pretty much being ignored," Bentz said.

She said the board should investigate other alternatives to a desalination plant such as side-stream reservoirs for increased reserves, and recycled water systems, also known as gray water systems, for conservation. The community could benefit from better water harnessing in the rainy season instead of letting it run out to sea and then pumping it back in with an expensive and environmentally unfriendly desal plant, Bentz said.

Cambrian gardener and astrologer Farmer is also running on the pro-conservation, or "pro-alternative" ticket.

"I'm not running as anti-desal, but as a pro-alternative candidate for a cost-efficient and environmentally friendly water source," he said. "And desalination plants are not environmentally friendly. My problem is that desal is being promoted as the only water alternative. And the complaint residents here have about the current board is that they are resistant to any kind of dialogue about other alternatives."

Farmer said the board has failed to realize the gravity of community opposition to the proposed desal project, considering critical residents "a small but vocal segment of the community." He pointed to mid-business-day CCSD meetings and private ad hoc committees as barriers for community participation in district proceedings.

Both Bentz and Farmer have been endorsed by the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club.

As of Oct. 16, Thompson had raised the most money in the race, with \$5,145 in contributions. Bentz raised \$5,008, including a \$2,000 loan to herself. Bahringer had raised \$3,506 and Farmer \$2,460, which included a \$348 self-issued loan.

Thompson and Bahringer received contributions from Sanders, Clift, and Cambria Chamber of Commerce President Mel McColloch, as well as a number of members of United Lot Owners of Cambria, a lobbying group comprised mostly of non-resident lot owners currently on the CCSD water wait list.

Though the candidates contend there are other issues at stake in the election—such as CCSD employee salaries, fiscal responsibility, and transparency—others familiar with the race contend it boils down to desal.

“It is about desal,” argued Sierra Club Chapter President Andrew Christie. “We supported the candidates most likely to take a step back and look at the pros and costs of the project as well as coastal development policies. These are areas [in]which the CCSD has not excelled.”

“It’s right at the heart of it one way or another since we do have an existing [water] shortage,” Sanders told *New Times*. “The master plan shows that desal is the best plan for Cambria, from an environmental standpoint and a cost standpoint.”

“We’re currently investigating alternative water sources, and there has been no commitment to build a plant, but there’s people who are running around, lighting their hair on fire,” Sanders added.

In past—and certainly less polarized—years, the Cambria Chamber of Commerce and the League of Women Voters coordinated and hosted candidate forums prior to district elections. So in a race with two converse sets of candidates, some residents are wondering why no forum was held this year. McColloch, president of Cambria’s Chamber, told *New Times* he didn’t know.

“Frankly, we have so many things going on in the chamber right now, it just passed us,” McColloch said. “... If someone was pushing me [for a forum], I would have made some time, but I wasn’t made aware.”

Though water issues are glinting on at the surface of this election, the politics boil down to a deeper issue of growth and development. Facing a water shortage, the community of roughly 6,500 imposed a building moratorium in 2001. A stipulation in the CCSD’s Water Master Plan caps water connections at 4,650 dwelling units, or a population of between 7,700 and 10,600 people.

But many residents still fear the proposed plant would not only allow for more growth, but actually require it to generate greater property tax revenues to pay for the project in the long run, even if federal funds cover the initial capital costs.

Officials began exploring desal after they had to close their Santa Rosa Creek aquifer due to contamination from the gasoline additive MTBE. The town currently relies on the San Simeon aquifer.

If approved as planned, the desalination plant would treat seawater pumped from subterranean aquifers on the coastline. Since first being proposed in 1993, the project has been held up in environmental and feasibility studies. Despite millions in community funding for said studies, environmental concerns about the plant’s possible effects on sea kelp, steelhead trout, and sea otter populations, as well as mercury contamination and potential hazardous waste spills, remain.

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