



Funding for water district projects still in question

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The sources of funding for two projects that the Ramona Municipal Water District (RMWD) is working on largely depend on the availability of water and the sale of property.

At the RMWD Board meeting Nov. 10, board members were updated on the status of plans for the Bargar Water Treatment Plant and for the brine ponds for the San Vicente Wastewater Reclamation Plant.

Charlie Grace, district operations manager from Southwest Water Company, was at the meeting to answer questions from the board regarding plans for the Bargar water plant.

The plant, which has not been operational since 2007, is being re-designed by Nolte & Associates. The design is about 90 percent complete, and the water district has been talking to Southwest about constructing and operating the plant and then selling the water back to the district.

To provide the board with more information about Southwest, Grace passed out a company pamphlet that states that, through public-private partnerships with cities and community services districts, Southwest operates and manages 20 water and wastewater facilities in California, including in Burbank and Corning.

With Lake Sutherland being the source of water for the Bargar plant, Director Red Hager asked Grace if he realized the lake only has water 70 to 80 percent of the time.

"It is certainly a concern," said Grace, adding that RMWD General Manager Ralph McIntosh is trying to negotiate with the city of San Diego, which owns Lake Sutherland.

McIntosh said he has written a letter to the city regarding the current "Water Exchange and Water Transportation Agreement" between the district and the city.

"When Charlie and I were having this discussion, one of the concerns that he has had and some other investors, I believe, is they know of the operational procedures of Sutherland Reservoir and how the city operates it and transfers water between it, and to them it's a big concern as well," said McIntosh.

Although Lake Sutherland relies on rainfall, McIntosh stated in his letter to the City of San Diego Water Operations Division that Sutherland has always been an unreliable source for RMWD "not so much because of Mother Nature but due to the manner in which the city operates and controls the lake levels, as understandably necessary for city operations." The city transfers water to the San Vicente Reservoir.

In his letter, McIntosh said the Ramona water district may want to request that the minimum storage amount of acre feet left in the lake be increased, "thus increasing the reliability to RMWD for treatment of water."

The letter was dated Nov. 4, and McIntosh said that the water district has not received a response yet. One idea, he said, is to talk the city into a three-year agreement rather than a year-to-year agreement.

"That may work a little bit easier," McIntosh said. "There's no detriment to them. I don't know why they wouldn't be willing, but it's hard to say."

Once the water supply issue is resolved, Grace said, "Then I can contact my team and set up a meeting and start moving forward and really look into financing and constructing the project."

"We built the plant years ago and used it successfully for a long time," said Director Darrell Beck. "In my opinion it's a benefit to Ramona because it's gravity flow from a source of water that's 500 feet above the valley as opposed to where we get our water now. I see a benefit to this if we can work it out. The finances right now are not the best in the world because of the world situation, but I'm sure that will improve."

"The key piece is whether we can get this new agreement with the city," Jim Robinson, board president, said.

Grace agreed, saying that, from an internal standpoint, "You'll be more comfortable moving forward with a \$5 million project knowing that you have a secure source of water."

Hager asked whether Southwest would use the existing building at Bargar.

RMWD District Engineer Tim Stanton said the technology is pretty similar to what they have been using but the design is for a package plant which will differ from the current facility.

"We'll use the building and the plumbing that's out there and some of the storage facilities we have," said Stanton.

The filters at the site will be abandoned, he said.

The board also discussed funding for the brine ponds for the San Vicente Wastewater Reclamation Plant and the possibility of selling a house on property purchased by the district earlier this year. The house sits on a parcel of approximately eight acres. The district only needs a portion of that acreage to build the brine ponds.

The board was hoping to split the lot, sell the house and use the proceeds from that sale to help fund the construction of the brine ponds.

Stanton informed the board that a lot split may not be possible. Legal Counsel Sophie Akins said there appears to be a zoning limitation in that area with a minimum eight-acre parcel size.

"I'm looking into whether we'll need to get a variance from the county with respect to that eight-acre parcel size or some exemption that would apply to us," said Akins.

The last preferable option, if the lot cannot be split, Akins said, would be to go with an easement that is behind the property.

According to Stanton, the way the process is structured now, construction on the brine ponds would not begin until the house is sold to help finance the project.

RMWD Chief Financial Officer David Barnum reviewed the order in which the board directed staff to proceed with the project: complete the design, sell the district-owned property to generate funds, and then obtain firm cost bids based on completed design. By doing this, RMWD would know how much money is available and how much is needed for construction, Barnum said.

Staff would then return to the board most likely with one of two options, he said. "One, we have enough money to go ahead and build it out of the fund, or, two, go borrow some money."