

Workshop seeks to ease water worries

*This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press
Tuesday, January 15, 2008.*

By ALISHA SEMCHUCK
Valley Press Staff Writer

PALMDALE - So far it seems any fears that a Valleywide regional water plan might fail have been for naught.

One by one, the lead agencies in the Antelope Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan have been giving it the green light.

Upward of 100 people from community residents to government officials and other assorted interest groups packed the City Council chambers on Thursday night for a workshop jointly sponsored by Palmdale City Council and the Palmdale Water District, an event meant to clear misinformation that has spread about the water plan and clarify its actual purpose - to keep Valley residents and businesses supplied with quality water now and in the future.

More than a year of stakeholder meetings, involving representatives from some 50 organizations such as the Antelope Valley Board of Trade, the Building Industry Association-Antelope Valley Chapter, the state Department of Health Services, the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, a host of cities and towns, water purveyors and Los Angeles County departments brainstormed, debated and arrived at the same conclusion. Something needed to be done, and done sooner rather than later.

Why? Because as Ken Kirby of Kirby Consultants in Northern California told the attendees, the water situation is worsening in the Antelope Valley. Demand exceeds supplies. If the stakeholders don't work in unison, by 2035 there won't be enough water left to support life in the Valley - not for residents and not for businesses.

Kirby, an engineer with extensive water background, had facilitated all 19 stakeholder meetings. He returned to Palmdale on Thursday to inform workshop participants of the Regional Water Management Plan findings. The final document recommends and prioritizes projects that will address water supply needs, protect water quality, provide flood control management and restore native habitat. Aside from identifying goals and solutions, the document serves as a tool for seeking state and federal grants to help finance the projects.

The Antelope Valley Region is competing for up to \$25 million in Proposition 50, Round 2 funds, but all 11 lead agencies must adopt the regional water plan by the Jan. 28 deadline or forfeit the chance of receiving even a portion of Prop. 50 dollars. To date, Los Angeles County Waterworks District 40, Lancaster City Council, the Antelope Valley-

East Kern Water Agency and Rosamond Community Services District have voted in favor of the plan.

Thursday's workshop seemed promising as boards from the remaining seven agencies weighed in.

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford, who initially vowed to oppose the water plan unless some projects that he thought were "toilet-to-tap" got axed, appeared to change his mind. Although some of the projects recommend the use of recycled water, and even the possibility of using tertiary treated reclaimed water for groundwater recharge purposes, no one has suggested putting a straw straight into the toilet bowl or connecting the toilet outflow pipes to the kitchen or bathroom faucets.

"I feel much better today than I did yesterday," Ledford said in a telephone interview Friday. "A vast majority of my concerns were addressed. It was good to see the stakeholders look to be unified in their support of the plan.

"You can't make more water," the mayor acknowledged, "but you can be efficient with what you've got."

Palmdale Councilman Mike Dispenza called the plan "great ... It's been needed for a long time. It comes just in the nick of time. We're at a crossroads right now. Something has to be done, or we're going to run out of water."

Like Ledford and Dispenza, Mayor Pro Tem Steve Knight and Councilman Tom Lackey backed the plan.

Knight said he's read quite a bit of the document. "I pretty much understand what the plan is and where we need to get to," he said. "We've got a lot of work ahead." He called the recommendations "absolutely plausible."

Knight said roughly 16 years ago the community groups discussed water issues and solutions, even drafted a plan, then never followed through.

"Many of the solutions then are the same as today." Only the technology has advanced, he noted. "I'm wondering what dropped the ball back then.

"The goal is, we need to get water in the Antelope Valley. I don't see how anybody can dispute that." If the plan is not adopted, Knight pointed out, then there "is no centralized core. There is no coordinated effort. We've already identified the problems. Now let's work on them. If we don't adopt the plan, we're wasting time."

Lackey found the workshop extremely beneficial.

"A lot of information was brought forward in a meaningful and understandable way," he said. "It appears that it's a well-orchestrated plan. It emphasizes the urgency for leaders to

recognize the water problems. Of course we have some concerns about how the recycling is implemented, but it's clear that recycling is going to have to take place - but, it's going to have to be managed. This whole water thing is definitely eye-opening.

"My biggest frustration," Lackey said, is "there should have been intervention procedures long before now. We should have been doing water banking."

The City Council is expected to vote Wednesday night on a resolution to adopt the plan.

Palmdale Water District directors will conduct a public hearing and vote on the plan at their Jan. 23 meeting.

Newly elected Director Jeff Storm had used the "toilet-to-tap" imagery during his campaign, and condemned the water plan for proposing such projects, a claim some regional water experts called nonsense, pointing out that every drop of water on earth is ancient and recycled.

Storm gave the workshop a mixed review.

"For once, somebody was answering the questions," he said, adding it was "very informative. I'm still not 100% convinced, but I'm willing to look at the science. I don't think it's a path we need to be taking off on yet."

Storm's board colleagues didn't share his view.

Director Linda Godin had attended several of the stakeholder meetings, so she said she had some familiarity with the projects.

"I think it's important for us to move forward," Godin said. She emphasized that the plan compiles suggestions "brought to the table" by the numerous participating entities and it is not etched in stone, but allows for change and revisions.

Regarding the use of recycled water, Godin said, "I don't think there's any other way for us to go." She also noted the tertiary treated water will be used mainly on park grounds and other recreation areas like golf courses.

"We're running out of water. We need to take action now," fellow water district Director Raul Figueroa said. "The waiting time has elapsed."

Figueroa expressed faith in the plan and in people like Kirby and the panel of water professionals who presented information at the workshop.

"They're the experts. They've worked on this quite some time," he pointed out. Furthermore, "We at the water district get constant reports and updates from our staff. We're pretty informed on what's been going on."

Like Godin, water district Board President Dick Wells had attended the stakeholder meetings and was pleased with the information revealed at the workshop.

Wells called it a "great presentation. I hope it answered a lot of the questions people had."

With respect to the lead agencies that still must vote on the plan, Wells said, "I hope they're all on the same page. I attended every meeting of the IRWMP, except the first meeting. I had my input while it was going on. It's a good plan that should have happened 50 years ago."

asemchuck@avpress.com