

HMB Review



Water recycling will require serious work

Posted: Thursday, July 23, 2015 10:11 am
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Recycling water has become a national concern as demand for fresh water has converted a once abundant and inexpensive resource to a scarce and costly one.

Currently, recycled water cannot be directly used for potable water applications, but it can be used for irrigation and other industrial uses. In Southern California, recycled water is used to recharge local aquifers and it is later recovered from these aquifers to be used as potable water. In Singapore today, recycled water is considered potable without this added step; that may happen here in the future.

Wherever recycled water is used, the cost of recycling is high compared to water obtained from ordinary natural sources such as lakes, rivers, wells, and snow pack and rainwater reservoirs. The cost of recycling is on a par with the cost of desalinization, which requires expensive energy and the disposal of a hazardous byproduct, salt brine. The cost of recycling, regulations to assure that recycled water is safe to use, and the environmental regulations associated with constructing and operating a plant make any project to recycle complex.

The recent interest at our local sewer authority, Sewer Authority Mid-Coastside, and at the Coastside County Water District to implement recycled water is timely and welcomed. The timeline suggested recently at SAM, however, is unrealistic; it will take many months to work out the details of how a joint, collective and costly effort could work.

There are three primary entities and three more secondary ones that must come to agreement to make water recycling a reality. The primary players are SAM as the

recycled water provider, CCWD as the recycled water delivery agent, and Ocean Colony Partners as the first, and currently only, customer for recycled water. There may be additional customers in the future. If the regulations change regarding, for example, adding recycled water to the potable water supply, that would be a game changer, potentially adding millions of gallons of water to supplies in California.

SAM is a joint powers authority of the Montara Water and Sewer District, the Granada Community Services District, and the city of Half Moon Bay. All six of the aforementioned entities must come to a contractual agreement regarding how to recycle water here.

Users pay for public utilities, so the primary cost of the first phase of recycling here must be borne by its first user, Ocean Colony. This means that those costs must be affordable and within this user's budgetary limitations; an expensive project that is beyond their means is dead on arrival.

The California Legislature amended Senate Bill 88 to fast track water recycling projects. The law now exempts projects based on existing infrastructure from parts of the California Environmental Quality Act. SB 88 also encourages communities like ours to consolidate agencies to reduce the complexity of negotiating contracts when multiple entities are involved. Water recycling here will require a new pipeline across the Pilarcitos Creek, a sensitive habitat. Thus a recycling project here will not qualify for exemption from CEQA.

Realistically, to arrive at a workable plan with a contractual agreement will require a year or two of serious effort and commitment on the part of all six parties. It is good news that SAM sees the necessity to move forward now. The principals must roll up their sleeves and get down to the serious business of working out the details. Determining who will be in charge and responsible for each aspect of this project as it crosses so many agency boundaries is task No. 1.