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Wastewater: Money Down the Drain

Recommendations: Page 44

R1: *Begin the creation of a master plan that includes ground water, surface water, and waste water.*

RESPONSE: The recommendation requires further analysis.

The Board will direct SCWA to review the possible scope and content of a county-wide master plan and report back by the end of December 2007.

Ongoing SCWA efforts could lay the foundation for such master planning if such an effort is able to be initiated in the future. For example, the existing Urban Water Management Plan (UWMP) will identify the extent to which entities in SCWA's service area are expected to use those sources through 2030. SCWA has also worked with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and other stakeholders to complete groundwater basin studies and is currently working with the County, USGS, and all other municipal groundwater users to complete a five-year comprehensive basin study of the Santa Rosa Plain Groundwater Basin. The SCWA is also supporting and actively participating in the development of a non-regulatory groundwater management plan in the Sonoma Valley that is scheduled for completion this year, and will go a long way towards securing the Valley's overall water supply for future generations.

However, the SCWA currently does not have the authority to direct, initiate, or control a "master plan that includes ground water, surface water, and waste water" for the entire county. Nonetheless, the SCWA will evaluate the grand jury's recommendation and report back to the Board by the end of 2007.

R2: *The SCWA and the BPU should contact other counties that have created a central separate water board to examine its feasibility and adaptability to Sonoma County.*

RESPONSE: The recommendation will be implemented

The Board recognizes the benefits that regional consolidations may provide ratepayers and taxpayers via cost saving opportunities. This has been demonstrated through various County and SCWA consolidation efforts in previous years. As such, the Board will direct SCWA to contact other counties in order to examine the benefit, feasibility, and adaptability of creating a separate water board in Sonoma County, and report back within nine months.

R3: The cities and county should consider creation of a common fund, pooling grants and a percentage of user fees to cover capital improvements.

RESPONSE: The recommendation requires further analysis.

The Board will direct the SCWA to report to the Board by the end of December 2007 on the feasibility of creating such a common fund or pooling resources, and the potential legal or policy restrictions in place that would prevent the implementation of this recommendation.

It should be noted that common funds already exist to some extent. For example, the Restructured Agreement between SCWA and the districts and cities, which are SCWA contractors, sets up common funding for capital projects as well as other common purposes related to potable water supply. Water Conservation, Water Reuse, Common Facilities, Storage Facilities, and various aqueduct facilities all have capital projects and each has its own identified funding paid for by the water contractors through the water rates. A copy of the Restructured Agreement can be obtained by contacting SCWA.

R4: Determine overall county priorities regarding wastewater and examine sewer rate models to see if they are designed to accomplish the desired goals.

RESPONSE: The Board will direct SCWA to review the possible mechanisms for establishing county-wide priorities, and, by the end of December 2007, determine whether such an effort is feasible. In doing so, SCWA will solicit input from other jurisdictions.

Establishing county-wide priorities could provide benefits for SCWA and other jurisdictions within the County. Currently, SCWA is working on a number of projects to accomplish regional wastewater reuse, seeking funding sources outside district and zone funds, including the North Sonoma County Agricultural Reuse Project. In addition, each wastewater system owned or managed by SCWA has long-term goals, capital improvement plans, and financial plans, including projected connection fees and rates. This information is available by contacting SCWA. The sewer rates are set for each of the entities individually. In addition, SCWA has worked to implement projects and programs that have overall county-wide benefits. For example, the SCWA is currently proposing a project that would provide recycled water to the Alexander, Dry Creek, and Russian River Valleys that would offset existing agricultural pumping of water adjacent to the Russian River and its tributaries.

R5: Determine how much, realistically, should be set (a)side for capital improvements.

RESPONSE: This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable.

While the Board recognizes the benefit of having a county-wide capital improvement plan, including the determination of how much funding needs to be set aside, SCWA has no authority to direct the manner in which independent jurisdictions budget for capital improvements. As such, the Board believes that it is not reasonable for the SCWA to be charged with making such determinations for areas outside of its jurisdiction.

However, funding needs for capital improvements are determined annually through the SCWA's capital projects planning process, which includes all the water and wastewater entities as well as the flood zones for which the agency is responsible. As a part of that process, SCWA updates its long-range financial plans with the latest estimates of cost and timing for the various projects.

The same legal obstacles that hinder developing a "masterplan" as referenced in Recommendation 1 also play out here.

R6: Reopen the examination of consolidation of smaller facilities and continue consolidation efforts.

RESPONSE: The recommendation will be implemented

Per prior Board direction, there are efforts underway to explore the possibility of transferring the Sea Ranch Sanitation Zone into a Community Services District with local ownership and governance. In addition, SCWA is considering the possible connection of the Occidental County Sanitation District to the Russian River County Sanitation System treatment plant in Guerneville; the South Park County Sanitation District and the City of Santa Rosa have an agreement in place whereby the City, which already treats the District's waste water and maintains the collection system, will take over full ownership of the District in 2011; Penngrove sends its wastewater to Petaluma; Rohnert Park, Cotati, Sebastopol, and South Park utilize the City's Sub-Regional Treatment Plant; and the Town of Windsor and the Airport-Larkfield-Wikiup Sanitation Zone share interconnections which provide operational flexibility for the operation of treated water storage and reclamation.

The Board will direct SCWA to report annually, as a part of its capital projects and budgeting process, the status of these and other potential consolidation opportunities.

R7: Develop a plan to increase the quantity of water that can be discharged from Lake Sonoma.

RESPONSE: The recommendation will be implemented.

The Board has already authorized development of a plan for getting additional water from Lake Sonoma. This is dependent upon getting the National Marine Fishery Service's (NMFS) Draft Biological Opinion concerning endangered salmon and steelhead in the Russian River. SCWA is working with NMFS to develop reasonable and prudent alternatives, which will be in Draft Biological Opinion, for flows in the upper Russian River and in Dry Creek. It is unclear at this writing how long it will take to develop a specific plan after we receive the Draft Biological Opinion. While we do not control the issuance of that opinion, we anticipate that we will receive the opinion in early 2008. The anticipated project time frame for deciding on all the alternative solutions for obtaining additional water and water rights is approximately 10 years

R8: Continue and expand the study of the aquifers to better determine their health and capacity

RESPONSE: The recommendation will be implemented

The Board has already authorized the SCWA to expand its efforts in studying aquifers by leading a five-year comprehensive basin study for the Santa Rosa Plain Groundwater Basin. It is anticipated that this study will be complete in 2010. For a thorough description of the objectives of this study, see the Urban Water Management Plan at http://www.scwa.ca.gov/pdf/2005_uwmp_report.pdf

Studies of ground water have already been completed for the Alexander Valley and Sonoma Valley. As a result of the Sonoma Valley study, the Board has authorized SCWA to lead the effort to draft a non-regulatory ground water management plan to comply with AB3030 by the end of 2007.

Respectfully Submitted,



Valerie Brown, Chairwoman
Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

- c: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
- Bob Deis, County Administrator/Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
- Denise Gordon, Executive Officer of the Superior Court