

Opinion

10/17/17
Item 2.5-L
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Editorial

Should vote against governor's Delta twin tunnels project

The Santa Clara Valley Water District Board will vote today on whether to commit to raising ratepayer taxes by at least \$1 billion to pay for its share of the Big Dud — Gov. Jerry Brown's \$17 billion plan to build two massive, 35-mile, 40-foot-high tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta that won't add a drop of new water to California's supply.

It would be irresponsible to pin that level of commitment on ratepayers when no one — not the governor and certainly not the water district's board of directors — knows what the final cost will be.

Nor is there a clear governing structure in place to prevent Southern California from gulping excessive amounts of water from the Sacramento River though the massive capacity of the tunnels, ruining the Delta.

The "WaterFix" plan is like saying you're going to build a 10-lane freeway but only ever use two lanes. Who believes that?

By Monday three Santa Clara Valley board members — Tony Estremera, Barbara Keegan and Gary Kremen — had written a memo supporting a cheaper, single tunnel instead of two. That would provide reliable transport of Delta water but also could free up money for conservation, storage and recycling projects that will truly increase water supply, and it has the support of many environmentalists. It's well worth further study by the state.

Costs to Santa Clara County for limited return is the fundamental problem with the tunnels.

Last month the Westlands Water District, America's largest irrigation district, voted 7-1 to pull out of the project, saying the benefits didn't justify its expected \$3 billion cost. That cost now would have to be paid by other agencies.

After Westlands' vote, Santa Clara Valley Water District Chairman John Varela

told The Mercury News' Paul Rogers, "I can't imagine how we can go forward when one of the most significant water users in the state is sending a message that this project doesn't pencil out for them. If it doesn't pencil out for them, how does it pencil out for us?"

The Metropolitan Water District serving Los Angeles and San Diego has voted to support the project. Three Bay Area water agencies, including the Contra Costa Water District, East Bay Municipal Utility District and San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, are not participating. The Alameda County Water District voted full support, but Kern County voted to go in partially, leaving another potential \$1 billion hole.

Here's the other, perhaps biggest cost problem: Digging projects are notorious for huge cost overruns. The cost of America's largest, Boston's Big Dig, ballooned from \$2.6 billion to nearly \$15 billion before it was completed eight years behind schedule. The European channel project between England and France, a single, 31-mile effort, came in at nearly double its original budget.

A guiding principle of the Estremera-Keegan-Kremen memo is that: "We will not allow Silicon Valley values and priorities to be placed at a disadvantage relative to Central Valley agriculture or Southern California."

The governor's twin-tunnel project does not meet that standard and does not deserve the Santa Clara Valley Water District's support.

Cartoonist's view



TOM MEYER

ONLINE EXTRA

Go to www.mercurynews.com/opinion to view our cartoon gallery on the Hollywood sex scandal.

Readers' letters

Water district board should vote no on Delta tunnels

The Santa Clara Valley Water District will vote today on the Delta twin tunnels project. Those who know the Delta best are pleading with the rest of us to just say no to the tunnels, which will pull water out of the Sacramento River before it enters the Delta. Not only should we care about our neighbors and the health of California fisheries, but the uncertain hydrology of climate change also demands that we reduce our reliance on imported water and increase investments in local water supply.

I was raised to disdain the wasteful water use of Southern California, but the Mono Lake decision pushed them to change. Now they are ahead of us when it comes to water recycling, stormwater recapture and demand reduction. Today, even Los Angeles' mayor believes the tunnels would be a dubious investment. Saying no to the tunnels will encourage California to align water rights with reality, hire local labor to expand local supply and prioritize water use that reflects our values.

— Rev. Lindi Ramsden,
San Jose

Flush twin tunnels project down drain

Gov. Jerry Brown's ill-conceived WaterFix project is circling the drain and it's now up to the Santa Clara Valley Water District to flush it down. That board should heed the advice of The Mercury News ("California audit shows twin-tunnel WaterFix is broken beyond repair," Editorial, Oct. 5), the State Auditor's Office and countless other critics to reject this disastrous water diversion scheme when it meets today. Following the Westlands Water District's rejection of the project, Santa

Clara is in a position to kill this project once and for all. Doing so would help save salmon runs, Delta smelt and other imperiled species — as well as California taxpayers. Then we can all work together on a new plan that meets California's long-term water and environmental needs through conservation, compromise and consensus.

— Jeff Miller,
Center for Biological Diversity,
Oakland

Feinstein still capable of doing a good job

Ro Khanna is just barely getting his feet wet in politics, and he's calling on Sen. Dianne Feinstein to be replaced. Can we talk age discrimination? Please! She has been a good senator, and I would gladly vote for her. I believe if she felt that she couldn't do the job, she would not have decided to seek re-election.

— Mary Ruiz, San Jose

Ban all gas-powered leaf blowers in SJ

Kudos to San Jose Councilmember Donald Rocha for proposing a study on banning gas-powered leaf blowers, as more than 400 California cities have done.

As we've experienced this past week, the quality of the air dramatically affects our health and well-being. Gas-powered leaf blowers are terrible pollutants. According to Michael Benjamin of the California Air Resources Board, small off-road engines like gardening equipment will soon surpass vehicles as the biggest single ozone polluter in the state.

As a nurse, I'm appalled at how those using leaf blowers inhale known carcinogens like benzene. As a mother, I'm fed up with our children commuting to school inhaling toxic fumes spread by blowers spew-

ing our neighborhood.

Let's apply our spirit of innovation to solving this environmental threat in a financially sustainable way. Call your San Jose City Council members today and ask them to prioritize banning leaf blowers at today's priority-setting session.

— Amanda Senior,
Mothers Out Front South Bay,
San Jose

Adam Schiff might make a terrific senator

Scott Herhold suggests (Page 1B, Oct. 15) that new Congressman Ro Khanna may be angling for an gubernatorial appointment to replace Sen. Dianne Feinstein (age 84) if she is runs again next year, is re-elected and later resigns during her next six-year term. Maybe so, but it appears California has a true star for the job in Congressman Adam Schiff, who represents the Hollywood-Burbank area.

Schiff is the senior Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee that is investigating Russia's role in the election of President Donald Trump. Brilliant, articulate, moderate and sane, Schiff might well be a terrific senator.

— Gary Wesley,
Mountain View

Solar power would reduce wildfire risk

The Mercury News (Editorial, Oct. 12) asked whether PG&E line maintenance practices led to the disastrous fires this month. If we had been sufficiently encouraging solar power, lines would not even be needed. Solar is better for the environment in many ways, some that most haven't even acknowledged. I have owned two homes with solar power. Cost is no longer a barrier.

— Robert Wahler,
San Jose

WATER PROVIDER

Will Valley agency sink \$17B Delta tunnels?

Gov. Brown visited to lobby; board may OK smaller plan

By Paul Rogers

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In its most far-reaching decision in more than 50 years, Silicon Valley's largest water provider will vote Tuesday on whether to embrace or reject Gov. Jerry Brown's \$17 billion plan to build two massive tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District, based in San Jose, is considering contributing at least \$620 million to the project — more than \$1 billion when financing costs are included. The vote could shape whether the project is ever built or if it is reduced in size.

On Monday, following lobbying from Brown's top aides and the governor himself, it appeared that a majority of board members was leaning toward supporting a smaller project, with one tunnel, at potentially half the cost. That could send the project back to the drawing board.

"The project has to be sized correctly. Right now it's too big and too expensive," said Gary Kremen, a mem-

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Tunnels

FROM PAGE 1

ber of the Santa Clara Valley Water District's board. "The two tunnels project is too much."

The meeting will be webcast live at 1 p.m. Tuesday. The tunnels plan is one of Brown's two legacy projects, the other being high speed rail.

A week ago, on Oct. 9, Brown quietly came to Santa Clara to meet with 20 Silicon Valley CEOs to urge passage of the project. The meeting, hosted by San Francisco 49ers CEO Jed York at Levi's Stadium, also included two members of the Santa Clara Valley Water District board, chairman John Varela and Dick Santos. Participants said Brown applied pressure, but both Varela and Santos said they were worried about the high costs.

"We're going to be making sure the taxpayer is not on the hook," Santos said Monday.

Under a plan first proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger a decade

ago, Brown is proposing to build two concrete tunnels, each 40 feet high and 35 miles long, under the Delta, the vast network of sloughs and wetlands between San Francisco Bay and Sacramento. The Delta is a linchpin of water supplies for two-thirds of California's residents and millions of acres of farmland.

Supporters say the project, which Brown has dubbed the "WaterFix," will improve drinking water reliability for cities from San Jose to San Diego by taking freshwater from the Sacramento River south of Sacramento near the community of Courtland, and delivering it to giant state and federal pumps near Tracy. That, they say, would better armor the state's water system against earthquakes, but also would reduce reliance on those pumps, which judges have ordered to be slowed or stopped at times when endangered fish such as salmon and smelt are near them.

"At least 40 percent of our water comes through the Delta," said Mike Mielke, senior vice president for the

Silicon Valley Leadership Group, a San Jose-based coalition of businesses, nonprofits and other large employers that supports the project. "The status quo in the Delta is unsustainable. We can't simply rely on local sources."

Critics, however, call the project an expensive water grab by Southern California cities and San Joaquin Valley farmers that could saddle Santa Clara County residents with higher water bills and property tax hikes they wouldn't be guaranteed to vote on under a loophole in Proposition 13.

"It's a new century. We view the tunnels as a 20th century solution to a 21st century problem," said Tim Stroshane, a policy analyst with Restore the Delta, which opposes the plan.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District provides water and flood protection to 1.9 million people from Palo Alto to Gilroy. The last time it made a decision of this magnitude was in 1962, when its board members voted to import water from the Delta into the county through the construction

of the South Bay Aqueduct. That extra water allowed the growth of Silicon Valley — a farming region known until that time for heavily over-drafted groundwater.

Stroshane said cities should invest instead in recycled water, new reservoirs, capturing stormwater, and conservation — such as expanded rebates for removing lawns and old toilets. He noted the project's planners have said it will deliver the same amount of water as is now exported from the Delta — no more — and that much of the Delta water goes now to large farms in the San Joaquin Valley that export almonds and other water-intensive crops.

Last week the project was endorsed by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which provides water to 19 million people. It offered \$4 billion toward the costs. However, another large district, Westlands Water District in Fresno, pulled out last month, leaving the question of who would pay its \$3 billion share.

A report by California

state auditor Elaine Howle on Oct. 5 said the project suffered from "significant cost increases and delays." It noted that the state Department of Water Resources "has not completed either an economic or financial analysis to demonstrate the financial viability."

Santos said he is leaning toward supporting a plan put forward Friday afternoon by three of the water district's seven members — Kremen, Barbara Keegan and Tony Estremera — that would support one tunnel, with fewer intakes and less overall capacity, at a cost that Kremen estimates could be half of the governor's proposal.

That concept received a boost in recent days when it was endorsed by Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, and reinforced by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

"Two big, 40-foot-wide tunnels? Running 150 feet underground for 35 miles?" Feinstein said in an interview in the Los Angeles Times. "When I look at that and see what it would take to get down to them if something happens, there has to be all these shafts.

It's awfully hard for me to see this is the way to go."

"Why do you need 80 feet of diameter in tunnels?" Feinstein added.

Brown administration officials say the dual tunnels are needed for redundancy, in case something happens to one.

On Monday, California Natural Resources Secretary John Laird hinted that the administration may be willing to change the project.

"Once we know which contractors are interested in joining WaterFix," Laird said, "the state will meet with participating contractors to discuss the specifics of the project and how best to optimize it to meet their needs."

Jonas Minton, a senior water policy adviser for the Planning and Conservation League, an environmental group in Sacramento, said he supports the district's proposed one-tunnel compromise.

"It appears to be a good faith effort to find something that might work," Minton said, "offered in a way that does not disrespect the governor."