

TITLE-----MMWD—Dueling Ballot Initiatives

"Neighborhood Speak"-----by Steve Patterson—Federation of SR Neighborhoods

In the last few months, you may have seen individuals gathering signatures out in front of grocery/drug stores. In all likelihood it was a small, but very committed group of people that are backers of the Marin Responsible Water Policy Ballot Initiative. To qualify to be on the ballot for November, they needed to get 11,000 signatures by early June. Turns out they got 18,000 signatures, just to be on the safe side. This initiative would prohibit the MMWD from spending any more rate payer funds to study, design or build a desalination plant.

To date, MMWD has already spent several million dollars to study and plan for the ultimate construction of a desalination plant that could ultimately cost \$400 million dollars of rate payer money to build and operate. This initiative if passed would stop that from happening. Many feel that falling consumption of water and greater conservation of water by ratepayers makes desal water completely out of whack, given the costs/benefits. Others feel that environmentally such a plant would be an environmental disaster for a variety of reasons. Still others feel many conservation methods have been overlooked and so much more still can be done.

On June 26th at a raucous MMWD meeting, the board decided to place its own ballot initiative on the November ballot which would still allow MMWD to spend money on planning and doing further analysis/study as well as apply for state and federal permits, all of which can amount to huge sums of money. The MMWD initiative will also allow voters to say YES or NO on the actual building of a desalination plant. Backers of the first initiative literally flipped out that the MMWD board would turn its back on 18,000 people who signed their petition and ballot initiative and still give the MMWD the option in spending more millions in ratepayer money to study, analyze, study, analyze...

What is interesting is that this represents a reversal in MMWD policy since they have steadfastly opposed allowing voters to have any say in the desalination decision-making. So both initiatives will appear on the ballot. Confusing? Maybe, but on the other hand voters can vote FOR or AGAINST both initiatives. Either initiative will need a 50% vote to pass.

Concurrent to all this on the same ballot, 4 of the 5 MMWD directors are up for re-election. What that may signal are challenges by those who feel the current directors are out of touch and operating with a degree of arrogance that they know best and are deaf to any opposing perspectives. So any director challenges would likely become a referendum on desalination. So the November ballot will have lots of ways for voters to express their views on the water issues. What never gets discussed by MMWD or the directors are successful models of where desalination has worked and been economically viable in other places in this

country. Most examples of desal have been abysmal failures with many technical breakdowns or else sucking up immense amounts of electricity making operational costs obscene.

The Fall campaign season should be very interesting indeed. The issue of the desalination plant along with the election of 4 MMWD directors will likely define the concept of a nasty campaign. As it has always been, water in Marin is an intense topic with regard to supply sources and ways to generate a continuing supply of a limited resource. Keep your eyes open as we head into fall, and potentially the fall of many of the currently ill-defined concepts currently lauded by those at MMWD. Voter revolts have occurred in the past related to water in Marin. Will it happen again?

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