

Council OKs pipeline

Well to supply lake, offset evaporation

BY NICHOLAS MATTSON OF THE ATASCADERO NEWS

ATASCADERO Despite some vocal opposition in Tuesday's meeting, the Atascadero City Council unanimously voted, 5-0, to authorize City Manager Rachelle Rickard to execute an agreement with the nonprofit organization Friends of the Atascadero Lake and the Hansen Revocable Family Trust to convey private well water to Atascadero Lake, for the purpose of offsetting evaporation water loss.

•In 2013, residents of Atascadero suggested the Atascadero Mutual Water Company pump water into the lake to offset evaporation. Upon survey, AMWC declined to follow the suggestion. The study provided that during peak summer months, evaporation rate occurs at 250,000 gallons per day, or 174 gallons per minute, and AMWC was not willing to make that commitment at that time.

Friends of the Atascadero Lake formed as a nonprofit organization with the purpose of assuring water quality and aesthetics of the Atascadero Lake, among other things. A part of that effort has been the development of an agreement to build a well and pipeline to deliver water to a storm drain on Lakeview Drive.

Throughout 2015, Friends of the Atascadero Lake worked to install a well, pump, and electricity on the property at 8350 Portola Road called the "Portola Well."

The well is drilled down 260 feet, with water being reached at 63 feet. The Portola Well is estimated to produce 100 gallons per minute. Atascadero City staff concluded that the proposed well supply is unlikely to have a negative impact on the Atascadero Lake or nearby oak trees. The City's conclusion was supported by a lack of concern by the AMWC, which is responsible for the maintenance of Atascadero's water supply.

"Most of that water is trapped in a fractured rock layer," Atascadero Public Works Director Nick DeBar said. "The yield of that fractured rock layer is very slow. Talking to John Neil, the general manager of the Atascadero Mutual Water Company, and he said they had no concerns with the water supply."

The conclusion by the City and AMWC was doubted by neighbors of the Atascadero Lake, who voiced concerns at Tuesday's council meeting.

"The Atascadero Lake means a lot to me," Atascadero resident Nancy Koren said. "I miss that the lake is not currently full; that being said, I do not support the proposed action before you this evening. The damage to a tiny, vulnerable source of groundwater would far outweigh any benefits to the lake, to the detriment of the valley oaks."

Also discouraging the City Council from approving the agreement with the Friends of the Atascadero Lake and The Hansen Revocable Family Trust was three members of the Istenes family.

James, Brian, and Jonalee Istenes moved from Los Osos and have resided at the property across from the Hansen property for 16 years. With a well built to pull 144,000 gallons per day, the family voiced concerns about the future health of surrounding oak trees. "My concerns are that if the evaporation rate surpassing the ability of the pump to keep the level to a meaningful height," James Istenes said. "With the years of drought that we have gone through, going on four or five years now, how is this pump going to continually try to keep sustaining a level that keeps going down, and when is the point

where we are just dumping good groundwater into a basin that is evaporating faster than can be filled up. I think [the proposal] should be denied at this point."

Although the concerns did not stop the agreement, they struck a chord with the City Council. "I assume that when the lake gets to a really low level, where it has been in the previous two summers, that we would not continue to pump water," council member Heather Moreno asked, "Is that the case?"

The City, tasked with the ultimate role in determining use of the well, promised to monitor the use, and shut it down if prudent.

"If it continues to drop, at some point you have to say it is not worth keeping it a mud-puddle," DeBar said. "We would just let it dry up, and try again next year. We wouldn't want to put water in there for the sake of keeping it wet."

Addressing concerns of the effect well usage would have on neighboring trees, City Council member Bob Kelley cited his own experience as a builder.

"In the past, I've owned a piece of property that had a well near oak trees with the same performance as this well," council member Bob Kelley said, "and I've built numerous wells near trees, and never killed a tree. A good example is at Santa Rosa school. There is a well in the back corner, surrounded by trees and has been there for years. I personally don't have a concern."

After hearing from multiple sources around the room, Istenes conceded that it was not doom and gloom upon execution of the Portola Well agreement, but lobbied for prudence in the longterm.

"Both sides had good points," Istenes said, "and I'm all for a healthy environment around the lake, but at the detriment of precious groundwater there is a balance there."

The motion to authorize the City to execute the agreement for the conveyance of the Portola Well water was made by council member Brian Sturtevant, and seconded by council member Roberta Fonzi before the City Council cast a unanimous vote.

Although the opposition did not win the entire issue, there was a due diligence assigned to the City to maintain control of the well. "I'm happy that one of the gals brought up the issue of 'when do you call it quits,'" Istenes said. "If the evaporation rate surpasses the pump rate, and you have multiple year droughts, do you just keep it going? I'm glad that something I said set that conversation. [The City] has the right to say it is creating more of a nuisance than helping."

Friends of the Atascadero Lake president Paul Murphy assured the City Council of the nonprofit's willingness work agreeably with arising concerns or issues.

"If something does happen, we will shut the well down," Murphy said. "It is only here to maintain a functional lake. We want a lake, we don't want a mud hole. We don't want it to be overflowing in August. We want something that looks good."

DeBar also confirmed that the decision to run, or not run, the well was in the hands of the City, and insurance was possessed to protect against liability concerns.

"In the agreement, the City maintains the right to determine when this is run," DeBar said, "and when this is stopped. It is not the Friends of the [Atascadero] Lake's responsibility, it is the City's responsibility."

The future development of the pipeline and maintenance of the well will not incur City costs, as all construction and maintenance of the Portola Well and supply system will be the responsibility of the Friends of the Atascadero Lake.