

Water coalition sifts through priority projects

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PALMDALE - It took more concentration than gazing into a crystal ball for answers: Members of the Antelope Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan coalition sorted through a list of priority projects to judge which ones stood the best chance of getting a Proposition 50 Phase 2 grant from the state.

The coalition's main goal is to ensure a reliable water supply that meets the needs of Valley residents now and in the future. So participants at the 14th stakeholder meeting Wednesday in the Palmdale Cultural Center faced the challenge of narrowing the list of 18 priority projects which included plans for water conservation, plans for recycled water, plans for flood control and riparian habitat restoration and plans for a water bank.

The group of roughly 35 participants was instructed by Ken Kirby, a consultant and the meeting facilitator, to weigh the costs of proposed projects against expected benefits. He said that's one of the standards the state measures.

Other criteria the group considered in attempting to meet Prop. 50 requirements included projects slated to get under way within two years and combined costs of projects being submitted to the state for possible funding - an amount that must not exceed \$25 million, the maximum dollars given to any single region.

Another influential factor for the state rests on the amount of matching funds a region secured for a project, Kirby said. Grant applicants must reveal their sources of funding for projects and the amount they've been guaranteed.

"Larger matches are looked on more favorably," Kirby pointed out.

"Financing is one of the tougher sections to write," in a grant application, Kirby said. "We will be required to do a fairly detailed cost-benefit analysis. Who will benefit? How will they benefit? We want to tell a credible story to those we're asking to pay for it.

"It takes work and money to put applications together. Be strategic," Kirby advised. "Prop. 50 emphasizes implementation. Planning studies don't qualify."

Participants divided into five separate brainstorming groups, each expected to make a pitch for the projects to include in the grant application.

Kirby reminded participants that they were "committing to a scope of work for this grant." That means the funds could be designated for one specific phase of a project.

"You're coming up with a strategy to put together the best package for the region," the consultant said. "This is horse trading essentially."

In one brainstorming group, Brian Dietrick, a senior engineer with the Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts, made his pitch to include projects for the Lancaster and Palmdale water reclamation plants being upgraded, and cleanup of nitrates in the groundwater in a section of east Palmdale on land owned

by Los Angeles World Airports and leased by the sanitation districts.

"We've got CEQA done," Dietrick said, referring to standards set by the California Environmental Quality Act for construction permits on specific projects. "We've got bonds issued already (for) 99% funding.

"Beneficiaries would be all the ratepayers of (Lancaster) District 14 and (Palmdale) District 20," Dietrick said. He also made a pitch for including the Regional Recycled Water Project Phase 2, which some folks refer to as the backbone system, a purple pipe that, when complete, will transport recycled water to grassy public areas like cemeteries and golf courses in the vicinity of Lancaster and Palmdale. And, he also promoted a groundwater recharge project that uses recycled water - a pilot project west of Gen. William J. Fox Airfield.

Through that project, Dietrick said, the sanitation districts will "demonstrate groundwater recharge to the community."

Meanwhile, Palmdale Water District Assistant General Manager Curtis Paxton plugged the Littlerock Dam Sediment Removal Project, pointing out the local match would be "at least 80%."

Andrew Werner, a project engineer for Western Development and Storage, a private Los Angeles firm, appealed to the crowd on behalf of his company's planned water banking project on 1,700 acres west of Rosamond, between 150th and 170th streets west, from Avenue A north.

"We have a 99% match for the project," Werner said. "We have the funds in place. If any agency wanted to partner with us, you could seek Prop. 50 grant money. We're willing to fund the whole thing, but you could break off any share you want and partner with us."

As each of the five groups read the projects they would propose for the grant, Kirby said, "We've got a lot of common recommendations. That's good."

The backbone system made it on all five lists, the consultant noted. The Upper Amargosa Creek Recharge, Flood Control & Riparian Habitat Restoration Project was on four of the five lists. The one that didn't include it "explained why. They're thinking strategically," Kirby said.

"I appreciate them thinking strategically," said Bruce Hamamoto, with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works Watershed Management Division, "but if there's money on the table, I say, go for it."

"Water conservation in general is your best bang for the buck," said Rob Morrow, a project engineer with RMC Water and Environment, a private firm in Santa Monica.

Amid all the choices, the group did arrive at consensus. Melinda Barrett, water conservation program manager for Los Angeles County Waterworks Districts, emphasized this is a preliminary package the group agreed on and is not set in stone.

But eight of the 18 priority projects were selected, including the Upper Amargosa Creek Recharge plans; the backbone system; Littlerock Dam Sediment Removal; the Comprehensive Water Conservation/Water Use Efficiency Program; the Groundwater Recharge pilot project near Fox Airfield; and Amargosa Creek Pathways, Phase II. Upgrades of the Palmdale and Lancaster water reclamation plants also made the list, but the nitrate cleanup didn't.

Barrett said the projects identified by the group are "well-suited for Prop. 50. There may be some

fine-tuning to do as we prepare the package," she added.

When the grant application writers examine other components like the environmental documents, cost estimates and local matching funds, some adjustments could be needed, she explained.

Nonetheless, Barrett said, "It's encouraging that we were all able to agree. The decision-making was based on objectives of the plan, rather than the individual agencies' objectives."

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