

Ensuring a Good Policy Decision

Case Studies: Orange County and Los Angeles

Both Orange County Water District's Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS) project and the East Valley project in Los Angeles were studied as part of the WaterReuse Foundation project covering public perceptions of indirect potable reuse. The premise of "Ensuring a Good Policy Decision" is that policy makers (those who are making the final decisions, and whose reputations will be most affected by these decisions) will need to feel politically "covered" in order to support Water Supply Replenishment. The Ensuring a Good Policy Decision White Paper covers this issue in more detail; however, the following newspaper article illustrates some issues and misconceptions about the factors and utility behaviors that determine outcomes. An analysis of these issues follows the article.

Los Angeles Daily News, October 25, 2004

LOS ANGELES -- Nearly five years ago, a \$55 million water-reclamation project that Los Angeles officials said would "drought-proof" the city was derailed by public outrage over the prospect of drinking recycled toilet water. Orange County residents had no such qualms.

Five months ago, Orange County broke ground on a \$487 million "toilet-to-tap" project, slated to open in 2007, purifying enough sewage water to serve for 140,000 families. Far from being repulsed at the thought of drinking reclaimed water, though, residents there are boasting they'll have dependable, cheaper water when imported supplies dry up and leave the rest of Southern California parched.

While politics certainly played a role in the different outcomes -- Los Angeles' project was quietly launched in the middle of a mayoral campaign and while support was building for San Fernando Valley secession -- experts see Orange County's five-year public-education campaign as the determining factor in overcoming the inherent "yuck" factor in toilet-to-tap systems.

"We started telling people from the start that we're purifying sewage water," said Ron Wildermuth, the communications director for the Orange County Water District. "We have not had a group oppose the project after they've listened to the project and the alternatives."

Orange County took their plan to the community, holding neighborhood pizza parties, water treatment plant tours and hundreds of public meetings where they explained how sewer water would be purified and then added to underground water supplies.

Public television personality Huell Howser was hired to narrate a video explaining how earthy-smelling wastewater will be transformed into distilled, crystal clear water.

Politicians, initially skeptical of the project, were convinced to add their support.

"The thought didn't thrill me, to tell you the truth," U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Garden Grove, said of her initial reaction to drinking purified sewage water. "I see at the federal level the fight over water. We need to do something and after looking at the science I realize how lucky we are to be able to do this project."

Los Angeles took a far different approach.

A water-recycling project was initiated in 1990 as a way to reduce Los Angeles' dependence on water imported from the Owens Valley. But toilet-to-tap was mentioned merely as a possibility by city officials in 1993, when they announced state funding for the effort.

Public hearings were held in 1991 and 1995, during the planning process. Otherwise, little public attention was paid as the Department of Water and Power planned and built the East Valley Water Recycling project -- a system to pump 3.2 billion gallons of water from the Tilman Water Reclamation plant in the Sepulveda Basin to the Hansen Dam spreading ground in Sun Valley.

There, it would filter through the pebbly soil into underground aquifers, and become part of the supply that is pumped from wells, treated again, mixed with other water and piped to 70,000 households in the East San Fernando Valley and Southeast LA.

The DWP was so low-key about the project that even then-Mayor Richard Riordan and some City Council members said they were surprised when the agency announced in April 2000 that it was ready to embark on the project.

"They should have been far more candid on what was involved in the project. Reaching out means reaching out in a clear way that people will understand," said Gerald Silver, president of the Homeowners of Encino and a vocal critic of how the DWP handled the project.

In the face of public outrage, then-City Attorney James Hahn suspended the project, saying the DWP had failed to adequately inform the public about its start-up and potential health risks. After he was elected mayor in 2001, Hahn formally killed the toilet-to-tap project.

Current DWP officials say they still speculate whether an Orange County-style public outreach program would have made a difference in Los Angeles.

"I often wonder if I should have done the massive public relations campaign, like Orange County," DWP Water Services Manager Jerry Gewe said. "I was afraid I would create an issue where there wasn't one. My feeling was we were better off to do it and we had the support of the political leadership."

Former DWP general manager David Freeman -- who in the days after the controversy erupted in spring 2000 said he hadn't felt the need to tell Riordan the recycling project was about to begin -- blamed the demise of the program on front-page news stories about toilet-to-tap and turncoat city political leaders.

"We were up against bigger mouths than us," Freeman said. "All it would take is some leadership to explain this to people."

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Stories of Orange County and Los Angeles

Case Study Highlights and Analysis

This article is interesting because it highlights issues that relate to ensuring a good policy decision, if we understand some background information. For example, although the Orange County Water District (OCWD) did make a good case for developing a new water supply, they never collaborated with the community about different ways to solve the problem, and never allowed the collaborators to make recommendations. OCWD was pushing for the GWRS from the beginning. However, there were several things OCWD did do that were critical to the success of GWRS, including the following:

- They made a compelling case for investing in a local drought-proof water supply that also protected the groundwater basin from seawater intrusion.
- Over a period of two decades they built a track record of water quality leadership, and created water quality confidence through their dialogue with the community about GWRS.
- They were extremely diligent in reaching out to the groups and individuals who are listened to in Orange County, and who would be influential in policy decisions.
- They “covered” policy makers by developing a long list of written supporters that included both individuals and important community groups
- They demonstrated an ability to diffuse conflict by winning over those who were initial skeptics. Demonstrating an ability to diffuse conflict makes policy makers more confident.

Orange County’s efforts are much more interesting and focused than the “pizza parties and public meetings” mentioned in the newspaper article. Orange County’s success came from the focus and values of the organization, and their commitment to ensuring that policy makers felt comfortable with supporting GWRS. They built a strong foundation of written support for the project, and they demonstrated they could address the concerns of skeptics. All of these activities were critical for ensuring a good policy decision.

Clearly, policy makers in the Los Angeles case did not feel politically covered. Mayor Riordan and some members of the city council said they were “surprised,” and future mayor Hahn could not have taken the position he did if there was a strong foundation of support from people who mattered. From the quotes in the article, it appears that DWP managers were still unclear about the important differences between the Orange County approach and their approach. They felt they had political support, and they branded Orange County’s efforts as a “massive public relations campaign,” when in fact the relevant issues go much deeper than a communication program. This is not to say that meaningful communications are not important. Gerald Silver of the Encino Homeowners Association did not feel that DWP’s communications were candid, clear, or easy to understand.

Simply stated, trust in the utility and the utility’s ability to manage policy decisions has a profound impact on outcomes.