

Water for our future: Water District holds special meeting to speak with the public

By Michael Smit For The Daily Independent
Oct 24, 2024

						
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The Indian Wells Valley Water District held a special meeting on Oct. 21 to discuss its findings on the water situation in the Valley.

The meeting was a direct response to the IWV Groundwater Authority’s sustainability plan, which revolves around a pipeline to import water from the Antelope Valley region. The IWVGA believes importing water is the only way to ensure this desert region has access to water for the future.

The Water District believes the pipeline is too expensive and there are other ways of achieving sustainability. In addition, a recent study suggests the local groundwater basin that supports all water in the valley may actually have far more water in storage and annual recharge than previously thought. This study was paid for by the Water District, Searles Valley Minerals, and multiple local agricultural organizations.

Currently, the IWVGA does not accept the findings of the new study.

Throughout the years, a couple fundamental questions have bubbled just beneath the surface during Water District and IWVGA meetings. At this Water District meeting on Oct. 21, those questions erupted to the surface.

Some members of the public questioned what happens to the community if the Water District is successful in shutting down the pipeline, only to later realize the numbers in their study are wrong and we need the extra water.

“What happens if you’re wrong? What do we do?” [You’re deciding our future] based on an incomplete hypothesis,” said Ridgecrest city manager Ron Strand. He criticized the Water District board members for using brand new data based on an incomplete model to inform

their opposition of an imported water pipeline right at a time when the IWVGA has secured partial grant funding for the project – grant funding that may not be available again in the future.

“What is your plan if your numbers are wrong?” Strand asked. “How are we going to get water into this valley?”

The Water District board members responded with their own fundamental question.

Water District board member Ron Kicinski said, “What’s not to say that the wrong assumptions have been made already, and it’s going to burden this community with hundreds of millions of dollars in cost and responsibility when it’s not needed? All we’re asking is that people look at these numbers and look at the analysis.”

Water District board members stated the cost of the imported water pipeline could double the water bill for IWV residents, making the pipeline an unrealistic project. Some members of the public stated double the water rate would be reasonable considering the IWV is a desert region. Attending members of the Ridgecrest City Council cast doubts on the Water District’s cost estimate, suggesting that the actual cost of the imported water and its pipeline may be lower.

Concerning costs about the pipeline, Water District board members stated that they paid for their own cost estimate of the pipeline, using as much of IWVGA’s own numbers as possible. They also stated they sent this cost estimate to the IWVGA to request consultation with them, but have not yet received formal feedback on the cost estimate.

Then it comes to the amount of water available. The current accepted numbers used by the IWVGA in their groundwater sustainability plan state that the IWV groundwater basin naturally gets an average of 7,650 acre feet of water per year naturally. Meanwhile, total pumping out of the basin averages around 20,000 AFY, though that number has actually been declining thanks to conservation efforts despite steady city growth.

The Water District’s new study claims there is actually 14,300 AFY of natural recharge, along with significantly more water in storage within the basin. While the extra storage doesn’t affect sustainability goals, it does provide a cushion that gives more time to figure out solutions.

While the water agencies debate numbers, one number is not up for debate as its an observable fact: groundwater levels in IWV overall are declining by roughly one foot every year, and have been doing so for 60 years.

One domestic well owner said he drilled a well with 100 feet of water in 1978, but the water is dropping by almost two feet per year in his area.

“I thought it was going to last the rest of my life, but it didn’t make it,” he said. “So all those naysayers that say we don’t have a problem here, why does my well go down?”

People at the meeting asked the Water District board members what their solutions are if there is no imported water pipeline. So far, the Water District has provided none other than a concept of a recycled water plant and continued conservation efforts.

The recycled water plant is expected to bring in around 1,500 AFY. It does not reach sustainability on its own, but Water District general manager George Croll stated that he believes it’s a better option to achieve sustainability by building several small projects, rather than relying on one big project such as the imported water pipeline.

In addition, Kicinski has stated many times that if agricultural organizations stop pumping and the Water District’s new study turns out to be correct, then current water pumping might already be within the sustainable number for most years.

Without agriculture, current domestic pumping is around 11,000 AFY. This is indeed below sustainable pumping number based on the Water District’s study, provided that the water demand does not grow. However, even domestic pumping alone is far above the sustainable yield if it turns out that the IWVGA’s sustainable yield number of 7,650 AFY is more accurate.

The Water District, IWVGA, and other IWV water pumpers are involved in an adjudication lawsuit to determine water rights. The Water District has said that this lawsuit will also provide an official determination if they should move forward with the 7,650 AFY or the 14,300 AFY recharge rate. The Water District also believes that if the lawsuit goes in their favor, the adjudication process will also develop a new plan for sustainability.

Caught between these feuding water agencies hangs the fate of the valley.