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# Full commission ‘engaged’ in CPUC hearing on Cal Am desal project

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Monterey >> In a sign of how seriously the state Public Utilities Commission is taking the debate over the future of water supply on the Monterey Peninsula, all five commissioners attended a CPUC oral argument hearing on California American Water’s proposed desalination project in San Francisco on Wednesday.

Several of those who attended the hearing said three of the five commissioners asked a number of questions of the parties to the desal project proceeding, and all five appeared “engaged and interested” in the issue. Only a majority of the commission was required to attend.

Commissioners Carla Peterman, Martha Guzman Aceves and Clifford Rechtschaffen each asked questions related to the Peninsula’s water demand, the sizing of Cal Am’s desal project and the overall water supply. They also asked whether a proposed Pure Water Monterey expansion could meet the water system’s demand without the desal project, according to sources who attended the meeting.

Only commission president Michael Picker and assigned commissioner Liane questions, attendees said.

by the Marina Coast Water District and the city of Marina, for supporters and critics to make their arguments directly been last week’s release of a proposed decision for the desal

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In answer to Cal Am's proposal, some parties to the proceeding have criticized the desal project for a number of legal and technical issues. They called for postponing or ditching desal entirely in favor of an expanded Pure Water Monterey project and other supplemental supplies. They argued that would allow the Peninsula to meet the state-ordered cutback in pumping from the Carmel River by the end of 2021, and meet critical milestones along the way.

Monterey One Water General Manager Paul Sciuto, whose agency is building the Pure Water Monterey project, said the hearing was an important opportunity for back-and-forth between commissioners and parties to the proceeding as part of the review process.

"I thought it was great all five commissioners were engaged and interested in the proceeding and the process," Sciuto said. "The opportunity for the parties to clarify points and highlight evidence in the record but not in the proposed decision was important to get a well-vetted, comprehensive decision."

Other attendees said Sciuto was eloquent in his defense of the Pure Water Monterey expansion proposal, which he argued was further along than three CPUC judges found in the proposed decision. He also praised Planning and Conservation League Executive Director Jonas Minton for urging the commissioners not to rush into a decision on Cal Am's desal project while a viable alternative with less environmental impact was available.

Public Water Now Managing Director George Riley, whose organization is backing a fall ballot measure aimed at a public buyout of Cal Am's local water system, said he thought the commissioners paid close attention to the Pure Water Monterey expansion proposal. Marina mayor Bruce Delgado said he believed the commission gained a better understanding of the city's "community values" including the risk to its groundwater from the proposed desal project as a result of the proposal to feed the desal plant through nearby slant wells.

Delgado said it was "good to have everyone in the room," and speculated about the potential benefit of having such a hearing earlier in the process.

Catherine Stedman also said the hearing was a "good opportunity for commissioners to learn the positions of the various parties" and "clarifying questions." She said Cal Am officials appreciated the hearing and their case for the "importance of moving ahead with a water project as quickly as possible." She argued that opponents' issues were "not environmental review issues."

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“We believe that now is absolutely the time to focus on completion of our project rather than contemplate last-minute, unvetted alternatives and interim projects that aren’t capable of meeting the (river cutback order),” Stedman said.

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## Jim Johnson

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