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Update on California's Water Situation

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On Friday, I was privileged to speak with former Assembly member John Laird and Senator Lois Wolk on the issues facing California's water future. Well, today, some sort of water plan was released as SBX7-1, and SacBee has a copy of the language in PDF. It's 163 pages, and to be quite honest, I've not yet had the chance to get fully through it.

The key of this is that the financing has not been worked out. There is supposed to be some sort of a Big 5 meeting to work on financing in the next few days, but Speaker Bass has already inticated that she is growing weary of the negotiating in the dark and would like a more open process.

But as John Laird said last week, the key to this deal is the financing. Without subsidies from the state's general fund, the big deals for the Westlands and Metropolitan Water Districts simply do not pencil out for their customers. The SoCal Water agencies are feeding off the Delta, setting the stage for a big political firestorm.

There were quite a few developments today beyond the simple release of the plan. Accompanying the release of the plan was the news that the San Francisco Public Utilies Commission, which is SF's water district, has decided to back the bill as it currently stands. This is a break from previous statements, including a letter they signed indicating opposition to what was only a slightly different package at the time. The support of the SFPUC, a very strong water district that also controls the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, gives Sen. Steinberg's bill a shot to win over some Northern California legislators. Whether it's enough to get the votes is up in the air.

Meanwhile, in a story for the Capitol Weekly, the two powerful SoCal water agencies that originally pushed for a Peripheral Canal, the Westlands and Metropolitan Districts, think that this bill moves us closer to such a concept. Some say that's not the case, but hopefully by the time something passes, we can at least get a definitive answer about whether this does further the concept of a peripheral canal.

Brian Leubitz publishes Calitics.com, the leading California progressive blog covering California politics and policy, and is a candidate for Vice-Chair of the California Democratic Party. He holds a law degree from the University of Texas and a Master of Public Policy (M.P.P) from the Goldman School at The University of California, Berkeley. After practicing law in San Francisco, Brian transitioned into politics and launched Calitics .com in 2005. He has worked on several campaigns in the state, including the Yes on 93 (term limits reform) and the No on 98/Yes on 99 (eminent domain and property rights) campaigns. He currently is a member of the Democratic State Central Committee, serves on the CDP's resolutions committee, and is on the boards of the San Francisco Young Democrats and the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club.

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Comments

I believe that Brian asks one legitimate question about the package and misses widely on the second.

How we are going to pay for these policy changes is critical and hopefully we will have an answer in the next several

days.

On the second issue he, like many others focuses on whether these bills make a peripheral canal more or less likely. It is the wrong question, tied up in an outmoded understanding of the state's water delivery system.

A properly formed question starts with acknowedging that the existing system is crashing. The estuary is dying and the state's economy is in serious peril.

The lens with which to view water policy reform is to analyze whether proposed changes, based upon the best science and data available increase the probability that declining Delta species will recover and bring that about in a way that provides increased water security for the state's economy and water for its increasing population?

Whether these goals are achieved with a canal, a tunnel, or no conveyance is besides the point - and a diversion from the real issues.

The bills as written do not mandate nor prohibit a canal. What they do require is that the ongoing Bay Delta Conservation Planning process be certified as a Natural Communities Conservation Plan, the highest environmental standard that exists, if any new conveyance is to be adopted. They also require any conveyance to be fully CEQA compliant.

This is why they are suported by the Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, Nature Conservancy, Bay Institute, and Defenders of Wildlife - in addition to the Metropolitan Water District and Westlands.

For those who oppose, such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the River, the question is - what is your alternative and how do you pay for it? And if you get the muddled response that we can do it through conservation alone, ask them to prove it. fully implemented conservation programs do not eliminate the need to transport water - so say the Berkeley and Davis water centers - and the Delta is collapsing. So, if you oppose this compromise, and are inalterably opposed to changing the existing conveyance system what is your answer? After 4 years, many of us are waiting.

Posted by: alan gordon at October 27, 2009 02:18 PM