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Proposed Centennial Dam project takes center stage at League of Women Voters event

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Faces in the crowd pay close attention to the presentations of both NID General Manager Rem Scherzinger, and SYRCL Executive Director Caleb Dardick.

Passions ran high while murmurs and mumbles from the crowd abounded, but conversation and banter remained civil during Saturday morning's League of Women Voters informational meeting regarding the controversial Centennial Dam project.

When the dust settled a deluge of information had been presented, sometimes bringing two heavy-hitters in the world of water together — and at times leaving them distinctly at odds.

Kicking off the event was Nevada Irrigation District General Manager Rem Scherzinger, speaking for about 30 minutes on the advantages of building a dam on the Bear River between Rollins and Combie reservoirs. Then stepped up South Yuba River Citizens League Executive Director Caleb Dardick, who expressed a number of concerns about the project.

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A question and answer session followed. With the goal of keeping a lid on an emotional subject, League of Women Voters representatives allowed audience members to write questions on cards to be vetted and asked during the second hour. No live questions from the audience were allowed during the two-hour event.

SHOWING THERE'S A NEED

Scherzinger opened, only partially joking that he drew the short straw. He was asked to explain from NID's point of view why the reservoir is proposed, where it fits a need for the community and why people are opposed to it.

Among a number of points, Scherzinger explained that "climate variability" — saying tongue-in-cheek that using other words has a tendency to freak people out — is limiting snowpack, which is the most valuable source of NID water.

With water demands in the central valley and beyond continually increasing, snowpack continually decreasing and water rights possibly facing drastic changes, Scherzinger made his points for the Centennial Dam. He added that the dam has been in the plans for NID since 1927, so this isn't a new proposal.

Scherzinger added NID isn't simply planning to build the dam with the idea it's the only solution to a continuing problem. He said conservation programs on the agricultural and urban sides are key as well as sediment removal efforts at Combie and Rollins reservoirs.

"We can't do it alone," Scherzinger said. "Just one person rowing the boat leaves you going in circles."

Wrapping up, Scherzinger said the way the dam is set up wouldn't allow for any water from the Yuba River to be pulled to the Bear River to help fill the Centennial dam.

POINTS TO THE CONTRARY

Dardick then took to the podium asking questions about transparency, need, climate change and planning. He led off by saying NID had a golden opportunity to be more transparent by broadcasting meetings live on the internet but has chosen not to. He also insinuated NID was trying to keep quiet the fact that the Centennial Dam would be 275-feet high and the reservoir would flood the last six miles of public accessible, free-flowing river on the Bear River.

Dardick said this is the first time climate change — and he pointed out the importance of calling it climate change — has been used as a reason to build a dam. But he said there are just too many questions and too much uncertainty surrounding the project.

He brought up the Oroville dam and its damaged spillway as an example, asking why money couldn't be poured into maintenance of existing infrastructure instead of building new projects and drawing a supportive reaction from the crowd. He said building a dam may actually facilitate urban sprawl. He also said the original plan involved a power generation aspect but that's since been removed.

Dardick said the original cost estimate in 2014 by NID was \$160 million. Then he said the organization raised it to between \$200 and \$300 million, then this year to \$500 million with one NID member saying he wouldn't be surprised if it surpassed \$1 billion.

"That's close to our original estimate of \$1.2 billion," Dardick said.

Add that to debates over the existence of Native American burial grounds — one side saying they simply don't exist and the other saying they absolutely do — and Dardick's message was one of too much uncertainty.

Dardick wrapped up saying there are a number of other ways to conserve, save and store water besides building another dam.

WHAT NOW?

After fielding a number of questions, the last question hit the floor: Who will ultimately decide to build the dam?

There's still a long list of hurdles between proposal and construction, but Scherzinger said in the end it would be the five member NID board, three of whom were at the meeting.

Dardick said he felt that was the most important question of the day and encouraged everyone to talk to the people who represent them.

"They're here to represent us on complex water issues," Dardick said, adding that in addition to sharing thoughts about the dam, "we need to thank and applaud them for being here."

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