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Skeptics of Centennial Dam project address Nevada Irrigation District board

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Skeptics of the Centennial Dam on Wednesday filled NID board chambers, urging directors to release more information about the project and claiming its costs would far exceed current estimates.

Otis Wollan, president of the American River Watershed Institute and one of a handful of speakers, said his own estimates show the project could exceed \$1 billion, when financing is included.

“It is a billion dollar boondoggle,” said Wollan, a former director with the Placer County Water Agency. “You will be chained to a billion dollars in debt to bankers.”

The Nevada Irrigation District has estimated the project’s cost between \$200 million and \$300 million. Remleh Scherzinger, NID’s general manager, said after Wednesday’s meeting the total cost could reach between \$400 million and \$500 million, when property acquisition and a new Dog Bar Road bridge is included.

“It is a billion dollar boondoggle. You will be chained to a billion dollars in debt to bankers.” Otis Wollan
American River Watershed Institute president

“I’ve not looked at (Wollan’s) numbers, but on its face I’m confident that \$1 billion is a significant stretch of the facts, even if he is incorporating interest payments,” Scherzinger said.

The project would put a new reservoir on the Bear River between the existing Rollins and Combie reservoirs. A draft environmental impact report for the dam is expected in September.

According to Wollan's estimates, project costs including construction, the creation of a new Dog Bar bridge and all the required studies and permitting would reach almost \$500 million. Financing the project could add another \$500 million or more.

Peter Van Zant argued that a continuing drought across California would mean NID couldn't fill its existing reservoirs, much less a new one. He echoed Wollan's financial estimates when asking the board for its own project costs.

"The public and taxpayers and rate payers do want to know what the cost is going to be," Van Zant said.

Stepping to the lectern during the public comment period, Sean Dooley said his parents' home is on land that the new reservoir would flood.

"Lots of great things happen on that river," he said. "They are ready to fight this all the way through eminent domain."

Shelly Covert, spokesperson for the Nevada City Rancheria and a member of its tribal council, said she wants to see dams taken down, not built. Centennial Dam would affect Native American sites where people still perform ceremonies by the Bear River.

"We feel it's a huge leap in the wrong direction to put up another dam," Covert added.

Caleb Dardick, director of the South Yuba River Citizens League, said NID should consider repairing and modifying its existing infrastructure instead of building another dam. Additionally, he wants the board to incentivize water conservation, arguing a new dam should be the last option.

"2017 will be a busy year for the proposed Centennial Dam project," Dardick said.

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