

City Council recycles water debate

Experts describe pros, cons of using treated wastewater for irrigation

By KATHY SCHRENK
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REDWOOD CITY — Recycled water has not been studied enough for scientists to know whether it is safe.

Or, does the track record of projects across the country prove that its use is safe?

It depends on whom you ask. But these were the conflicting viewpoints presented Monday night at a City Council study session. The council is preparing to decide next month whether it will expand a program that uses reclaimed sewage to irrigate public areas in Redwood Shores.

Four experts, two sponsored by the resident-founded Safe-water Coalition and two employed by city staff, explained the pros and cons of using recycled water for irrigation.

The city held a similar session last fall.

One of the experts, Martin Atkinson-Barr, began studying recycled water a few years ago when an elementary school near his home in Southern California proposed using recycled water. "I was shocked to discover the lack of knowledge of water reuse advocates," he said.

Atkinson-Barr, whose specialties include epidemiology and treating Lyme disease, described the use of recycled water as "closing the circle." He compared it to cannibalism

and said other such experiments and accidents throughout history have caused grave consequences.

There are other problems with recycled water, he said. For one, it is unlikely that any mild illnesses or severe, long-term illnesses caused by recycled water could be linked to it. It would also be easy for young children to be exposed to toxins in recycled water because they do not understand the risks and the precautions necessary to prevent illness.

Atkinson-Barr believes precautions can be taken for older children and adults. In fact, he allows his 14-year-old daughter to play on fields irrigated with recycled water, cautioning her to wash up afterward and tell her parents if she gets a cut or scratch while playing, he said.

Another expert, Paul Lofholm, a professor of pharmacy at the University of California, San Francisco, described the health risks that could occur from chemicals found in recycled water. These include gastrointestinal and neurological disorders. Scientists have not determined the point at which chemicals like boron and manganese may cause such problems, he said.

Traces of human hormones and medications like the cholesterol drug Lipitor can also be found in recycled water, he

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