

Northern Colorado BUSINESS REPORT

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Dispute flares over 2009 NISP public affairs plan

By Steve Porter

BERTHOUD - In its running battle with the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District over a proposed reservoir, the Save the Poudre Coalition is alleging the district created a "secret plan" earlier this year to "dupe taxpayers" into supporting the \$426 million water storage and supply project.

Gary Wockner, spokesman for the coalition, said the district has renamed the Northern Integrated Supply Project - or NISP - and the 15 participants lined up to buy water from the project as "Communities for Water," a name he says is a "cynical step" to rebrand the "dying Glade Reservoir scheme."

"I think the NISP project looks terrible from every angle and the proponents are trying desperately to rebrand it," Wockner said. "Communities for Water probably sounds better."

But Brian Werner, water district spokesman, said the public affairs plan is "not a secret plan" and defended developing a new public affairs each year as "just doing good business."

"One of the things we told participants is we can't change the name of NISP but we can describe who these participants are and Communities for Water made the most sense," he said.

Fifteen towns, cities and water districts along the northern Front Range are supporting NISP's construction and have committed to buying shares of the water it would produce. The Glade Reservoir portion of NISP - to be located just north of the town of LaPorte - would divert a portion of the Poudre River into the reservoir as it leaves Poudre Canyon.

One year ago, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released a draft Environmental Impact Statement on the project that received numerous comments and criticisms. The Corps of Engineers is currently developing a supplemental EIS based on those comments and Werner estimated it will likely be another year before that document is complete.

Not on district Web site

Although the plan is not listed on the water district's Web site, Werner said "there's nothing in it I'm ashamed to have out there."

"It's the same thing we've been doing but we're making it very clear for our participants, who are paying for all of this," he said. "It's just putting it down on paper so the participants know what's going on."

NISP participants have so far spent about \$6 million on helping to produce the EIS and the supplemental studies now under way.

A press release by Save the Poudre said the plan was "accidentally posted" by the town of Frederick - one of the project participants - on its Web site. Dick Leffler, the town's engineer, said the plan was not accidentally posted and is still on the town's Web site. He echoed Werner's

assertion that the plan is not secret.

Leffler said calling NISP participants "Communities for Water" was meant to be an identifying name that was "more user-friendly and easier to remember."

"That's all it is," he said.

Kathy Peterson, general manager of Left Hand Water District and chair of the NISP participants' committee, said the name change actually was suggested by participants.

"The Communities for Water as a public strategy was not from the district but came from the participants," she said. "We decided we needed to get the word out and it wasn't happening. But there's nothing at all secret or cynical about it."

Peterson said part of the public affairs strategy contained in the plan is to reinforce public awareness that the project is 100 percent funded by its participants who are controlling its fate - not the water district.

"It was being characterized as a top-down thing by Northern Water, that they were pushing the project," she said. "Obviously, they're promoting it and it's part of their mission. But we have our own needs and by saying Communities for Water we are saying we're not part of Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District."

Peterson said the NISP project is not dying and has strong support from its participants and from the agricultural community. She said participants are more energized about it than ever.

"I think the group feels energized because we're hopefully going to get a (construction) permit soon and see it to fruition," she said.