

Setting it straight

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A story on Metro Page B1 Wednesday about an Auburn Dam poll said that a majority of respondents were willing to tax themselves to pay for the dam. In fact, it was a majority of supporters of the dam that favored a tax. Of all respondents in the poll, 40 percent said they were willing to pay \$25 a year in additional property taxes.

It is The Bee's policy to acknowledge errors promptly. Corrections will appear on Page A2 as well as in the section where the error occurred. Errors in Metro should be called to the attention of Assistant Managing Editor Scott Lebar, (916) 321-1182 or slebar@sacbee.com.

Many favor a new dam

Poll shows support for a multipurpose facility at Auburn.

By David Whitney -- Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON - A clear majority of people in Sacramento County favor building a multipurpose dam at Auburn, according to a poll commissioned by the Auburn Dam Council, an advocacy group that wants to build it using revenue bonds repaid by selling its water and power.

According to the poll of 404 registered voters conducted from Feb. 18 to Feb. 25 by J.D. Franz Research Inc., 62 percent of the respondents supported or strongly supported the dam's construction but were less certain about taxing themselves to pay for it.

"There is more support than perhaps I would have thought," said Jennifer Franz, president of the research company whose clients have included many state and local government agencies and businesses, including The Sacramento Bee.

The poll's release comes as the public debate over constructing an Auburn dam was revived by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' announcement last week of the escalating cost of retrofitting Folsom Dam for a greatly enhanced flood control mission.

The cost of putting in more and larger outlets on the 50-year-old dam has grown from about \$215 million when authorized by Congress two years ago to as much as \$650 million, the corps said. The cost estimate for that work, together with other components of the American River flood control plan, now is nearing \$1 billion, roughly the estimated cost of a flood detention dam at Auburn.

The poll was commissioned by the council to determine the sentiment of voters in anticipation of a campaign to construct a dam. It was focused on Sacramento County because the group sensed

that support for a new dam would be weakest there.

Such a dam is expected to cost in the neighborhood of \$3 billion because, unlike a detention dam built solely for flood control, a multipurpose dam would store water and generate power that could be sold.

Roger Dickinson, vice chairman of the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, said he sees alarming signs for American River flood control in the resurgent Auburn dam talk.

"It is counterproductive to allow ourselves to be thrown off stride in our goal of getting to 200-year flood protection," he said.

"We need to closely examine what's happened in terms of the corps' estimates. But it would be a mistake to reopen a debate which is only going to be detrimental to our ultimate objective."

Anthony Pescetti, the council's chairman and a former assemblyman representing southern Sacramento County and northern San Joaquin County, said the group is in the process of deciding now how it wants to proceed.

But Pescetti said the council may soon propose that voters of Sacramento, El Dorado, Placer, Yolo and San Joaquin counties create a special taxing district to support an agency that would build the dam with minimal federal or state help.

A power plant capable of producing at least 600 megawatts of energy would be a key feature of the dam and, according to Pescetti, its chief money maker.

"One of the things we have to look at is to see if it is expandable beyond the 600 megawatts, and then use the revenue that it generates to pay back those bonds so that in reality, there is no cost to any of the local governments," he said.

Although the poll buoyed the council's hope for re-energizing popular support for an Auburn dam, it doesn't advance the cause much beyond where it was 15 years ago. Sacramento County voted (58.7 percent to 41.3 percent) in November 1990 for a measure directing county leaders to work for construction of an Auburn dam.

Environmentalists Tuesday were thinking déjà vu.

"It doesn't look like there has been much change," said Ronald Stork of Friends of the River. "Of course, the ballot measure and this poll - didn't ask whether folks wanted to construct a dam on a series of earthquake faults and destroy 50 miles of the American River to provide water that is not needed locally so Southern California could get more."

Nate Rangel, president of California Outdoors, said he was struck by how little money supporters of the dam were willing to pay out of their own pockets to see the dam built. Only when proposed assessments fell to \$25 a year per household did a majority of respondents say they were willing to tax themselves to build it.

"I'm confident that once again, when all the chips are laid out on the table the vast majority of citizens, leaders and stakeholders in Sacramento will recognize Auburn Dam for what it is - a losing hand," he said.

Pescetti conceded that there are a host of questions lacking answers, the biggest one being whether Congress would ever approve an Auburn dam even if it got it for free or next to free.

"The reality is that we still would have to get congressional approval," he said. "We hope we'd be

able to get some (federal) flood control money. We are going to have to work with the congressional delegation to make sure that we have all the issues addressed so that if and when this goes to the voters we are prepared to move forward."

After last week's cost-increase announcement by the corps, Reps. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River, and John Doolittle, R-Roseville, said they thought it was time to take another look at building an Auburn dam.

But they also said they had no desire to undercut the deal that Doolittle reached in 2003 with Rep. Robert Matsui that made refurbishing Folsom Dam the centerpiece of the Sacramento area's flood control policy.

Robert Matsui died unexpectedly Jan. 1, and his widow, Doris Matsui, was elected in March to fill his seat. She has railed at the corps for badly underestimating the cost, but she has not backed away from doing the Folsom Dam work.

In an interview last week, Doolittle said he thought building an Auburn dam shouldn't be left up to private groups.

"What we need is some leadership," he said. "We need some people to look at the changed circumstances and exert some political leadership now."

The Auburn Dam Council is an organization of dam proponents that has been meeting for a couple of decades.

Among those identified as members are Placer County Supervisor Bill Santucci of Roseville, Sacramento Assemblyman Roger Niello, Placer County Supervisor Bruce Kranz, state Sen. Dave Cox of Fair Oaks and Assemblyman Tim Leslie of Tahoe City. All are Republicans.

The poll had a margin of error of 4.9 percentage points, Franz said.

About the writer:

The Bee's David Whitney can be reached at (202) 383-0004 or dwhitney@mcclatchydc.com.