

← Back to Original Article

CAPITOL JOURNAL

Water bond is circling the drain

The ballot measure, written in 2009, has some good ingredients but also some pork. It's not right for these times.

April 30, 2012 | George Skelton | Capitol Journal

SACRAMENTO — Might as well scratch one measure from the likely crowded November ballot: a pork-filled \$11.1-billion water bond that is dying of its own weight.

The Legislature produced this monster in late 2009 after years of wrangling by competing interests, culminated by an all-nighter in the Capitol.

Like the proverbial bar pickup, the bond wasn't nearly as good-looking in daylight.

It had been slated for the 2010 ballot, but the Legislature and then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wisely delayed seeking voter approval until this year.

Now, about the only people who want to keep it on the November ballot are opponents who'd like to kill it for good.

"It's the bond that can't win and won't be allowed to die," Assembly Water Committee Chairman Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael) told me.

Huffman prefers to either allow voters to deliver the fatal blow in November or that the Legislature take the bond off the ballot and bury it. Then, he says, "get to work on a better bond" that's slimmer and includes regional water projects and Delta habitat restoration, but not dams.

That probably wouldn't fly with the water buffaloes. They insist on tax-financed bond money to help build reservoirs, specifically the portion of reservoirs that stores water for public benefit, such as downstream fish habitat.

There's a growing consensus that the bond should be yanked, shelved and reworked. Or reworked and shelved. The order of things seems to be the only debate.

Senate leader Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) is pushing for a rewrite this year and a public vote in 2014. But there's little enthusiasm for rewriting now. Bond backers want to wait and measure voters' mood closer to the 2014 election.

One problem for voters this year with an \$11.1-billion water bond is that Sacramento is practically broke and has been whacking schools, college kids and the poor people's safety net. Debt payments on the bond would cost an additional \$777 million annually, give or take, for 30 years.

Another problem is California's slumbering economy, which has slowed the state's revenue stream and inspired voters to protect their wallets from anyone seeking government expansion.

"You couldn't pass a bond this year that provided walkers for grandmothers," says David Puglia, a longtime political operative who is senior vice president of Western Growers, a farm lobby that strongly supports a water bond.

Yet another political problem is Gov. Jerry Brown. He really doesn't want the water bond on the November ballot, believing it would distract from his proposed tax increase. In fact, if the governor had his druthers, there'd be only one measure on the ballot: his.

A water bond — any infrastructure bond — normally doesn't survive without a governor's fully focused support, including aggressive fundraising.

"We've got a good, strong water governor, but he can't make water his top priority this year," says Tim Quinn, executive director of the Assn. of California Water Agencies. "Neither can the other political leadership."

They're fixated on the budget deficit, taxes and the elections.

"Right now, my attitude is wait until an off-election year when things are calmer," Quinn continues. "We need to get the bond smaller, focus on high priority projects and make sure no one can argue that any pork is in it."

That's the biggest problem with this bond: the bloat that's commonly defended by pork chefs, with a wink, as "projects of regional concern."

The bond does have some good ingredients: \$2.3 billion to repair and upgrade the stressed Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, California's main water hub; \$3 billion potentially for two new dams; \$1 billion for water recycling and well-water cleanup.

But there's at least \$2 billion worth of fatback and arguably much more.

It includes \$455 million for "drought relief." The drought ended two winters ago.

There's \$100 million for the Lake Tahoe watershed, which ultimately feeds Nevada. Some of the money would fuel a proposed Tahoe water taxi.

There is \$100 million for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and \$100 million for Salton Sea restoration.

There are goodies spread all over the state — for bike trails, open-space purchases, "watershed education centers" and "climate change planning."

Maybe these projects have some merit, but not enough in this economic and fiscal climate.

The excessive larding illustrates the payoffs often necessary to garner a two-thirds legislative vote on controversial issues. It becomes a vote-seller's market.

Fortunately for California and Gov. Pat Brown, Jerry's legendary father, only a majority vote was required when his historic water bond passed the Legislature in 1959. It probably couldn't have achieved a two-thirds vote. And without that bond, it's doubtful there ever would have been a State Water Project.

A new bond is needed to stabilize California's water supply. The fragile Delta is the source of drinking water for 24 million people and irrigation for 3 million acres.

A landmark second part of the 2009 water package, which didn't need voter approval, created a streamlined governing structure for the Delta. It also provided a pathway toward construction of a controversial tunnel carrying fresh Sacramento River water underneath the saline Delta and directly into a southbound aqueduct.

Water agencies, funded by ratepayers, are willing to finance the projected \$11-billion tunnel cost. Taxpayer-backed general obligation bond money won't be needed. But politically, state and federal permits for the tunnel probably can't be obtained until the Delta is fixed. And that will require G.O. bond funds.

Water is complex and contentious.

But there's broad agreement on one simple fact: This pork bond should not be served to voters. They'd toss it in the garbage. Better to place it in the fridge, then pare and re-cook later.

george.skelton@latimes.com