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What do you think?

What do you think should be done with groundwater being pumped out of basements?

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Cracking down on water waste

Groundwater from construction work could be reused

By Jacqueline Lee
Daily News Staff Writer

 Millions of gallons of groundwater pumped from Palo Alto basement construction projects would be reused next year if a grass-roots group keen on protecting city groundwater has its way.

The City Council next month is scheduled to discuss how removing water from soil — a practice known as dewatering — affects buildings, infrastructure and vegetation around construction sites, especially in light of the drought.

Some residents have blamed groundwater pumping for the loss of trees and subsidence-related damage to neighboring homes.

Keith Bennett and other members of the group Save Palo Alto’s Groundwater, which formed this year, have urged the council to ban groundwater pumping at least temporarily.

Group members want the city to study the impact of dewatering and implement new policies to conserve groundwater.

“What can we do in 2016 that significantly reduces the amount of groundwater that is discharged into the storm drains from basement construction?” Bennett asked at a Dec. 15 council committee meeting.

The city should require quick turnaround for construction projects and impose heavy fines for work that takes longer because the length of a project affects how much water is pumped, he added.

“When you’re talking about reducing waste, you’re talking about reducing use,” Bennett said.

Bennett compared two similar-sized basement projects that took place within blocks of each other: One on Hampton Street took six months while one on Byron Street took three weeks.

Another effective strategy would be for the city to require a significant portion of the water to be used on the property or nearby properties, possibly through a pipe encircling the block so it can percolate back into the shallow aquifers, Bennett said.

“It’s not whether you dewater; it is what you do with the water,” Bennett said.

Bennett estimates that 80 percent of the pumped water from basement construction could be kept from entering the storm drain if dewatering takes only two to three weeks and crews pump only 20 to 30 gallons per minute.

Phil Bobel, the city’s assistant director of Public Works, agrees.

“To minimize the duration is the most substantial thing,” he said. “If you could minimize the duration by 50 percent then you’ve minimized the flow by 50 percent.”

For now, a typical site pumps about 100,000 gallons of water per day during the three to four months it takes to construct a basement, Bobel said.

Only about 2 percent of the non-potable water is captured for the city, neighbors or other contractors to use, Bobel said.

“They have every incentive in the world right now to put those wells down deeply and to pump out water vigorously because they’re just trying to prevent their site from getting wet,” Bobel said. “Currently, that’s their only incentive.”

Staff recommends that the city expand its basement pumping guidelines so applicants will have to study the effect of dewatering on nearby buildings, infrastructure, trees and landscaping, and look at ways to avoid negative impact.

“We’re creating a very substantial incentive, I would argue,” Bobel said.

Dewatering permits currently are issued during the dry months from April to October to anyone who wants to build a basement. Applicants have to submit a report on where and how the pumping will be done.

If the council approves proposed guidelines, applicants would also have to get a determination from an independent, geotechnical engineer to certify the “cone of influence” of the project and share findings with the city and adjacent landowners, Bobel said.

The council’s Policy and Services Committee has discussed dewatering concerns over the course of two meetings in December, hearing recommendations from city staff and residents.

The four-member committee voted unanimously on Dec. 15 to bring the most-time sensitive proposals, such as changes to the basement pumping guidelines, to the full City Council.

The other time-sensitive ideas include staff recommendations to maximize on-site water reuse at basement construction sites.

For instance, applicants would be required to have a water truck hauling service take groundwater from the construction site at least once a week to a city park or a neighbor’s yard where it could be used.

Councilmen Tom DuBois and Cory Wolbach, both members of the Policy and Services Committee, sup-
ported the idea of charging a fee for the amount of groundwater that goes into the storm drain systems.

Both said doing so would put some value on groundwater. “You start to say, ‘This water is not a waste product,’” DuBois added. “If the drought gets worse, we can change the rate.”

DuBois also urged staff to consider delaying the issuance of basement dewatering permits for now if it appears that new guidelines could be implemented around April.

DuBois also asked staff to look into how a construction site’s impact on neighboring properties will be defined, measured and enforced. And he asked that it explore how multiple construction projects where pumping is allowed at the same time will affect nearby properties.

Wolbach said he does not think a moratorium on basement dewatering, as requested by some residents, is “the best solution right now.”

The city is working toward a solution but an overhaul of the city’s groundwater policies will take longer than 2016 to complete, he added.

City Manager James Keene said the city is taking a “triage” approach to an issue that emerged from concerned neighbors.

The city will do what it can immediately to address the issue, but further study is needed to get a better understanding of the county’s groundwater system and the impact of additional fees for discharging groundwater into the storm drain system, for instance.

The new rules would create significant consequences that need a serious assessment, Keene said.

“There are implications both for neighbors who are concerned about the impacts and there are implications for neighbors who are building their dream home. We might be imposing requirements on them that are an additional cost that may affect their schedule and their plans and that sort of thing,” Keene said.

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