

Regulations, A River, and Ratepayers

Donner Summit Public Utility District Sets the Bar for Community Inclusion

By Schaelene Rollins, Donner Summit PUD



In the beautiful high mountains of the Sierra Nevada, the South Fork of the Yuba River begins its 40-mile journey to Nevada City beginning at Donner Summit. The river is considered the area's hallmark for many, and an active – and vocal – advocacy group works hard to keep it that way. Donner Summit PUD (DSPUD) discharges treated wastewater effluent at the river's headwaters and when it came time to renew its discharge permit in 2009, environmental groups and ratepayers got heavily involved.

It isn't unusual for there to be a disconnect between environmental groups focused on protecting habitats and aquatic life and the ratepayers who must foot the bill for advanced treatment options that best protect those assets. In Donner Summit, the cost to bring the most advanced treatment to their wastewater facility would eventually reach \$19.5 million. While other

options were considered, some with a lower price tag, DSPUD and its board of directors chose to be stewards of the environment and do what was best for the river.

The story of how DSPUD, local environmental groups, and ratepayers were managed and brought to consensus is a textbook case of public outreach and inclusion, which eventually met everyone's needs, fulfilled compliance requirements, and protected a beautiful river.

From early on, the project faced many challenges. Upgrades needed to modernize the plant to meet federal and state mandated discharge permit requirements were going to be costly. Donner Summit terrain is not an easy landscape to build on, especially in winter months. Although the year-round residential population is small, there is a large population flux on winter weekends when four area ski resorts are busy, which makes it difficult to maintain a healthy population of microbes for biological treatment options. And having ratepayers and environmental groups on board was going to be a hurdle.

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The project team was tasked with developing alternatives that addressed DSPUD's unique landscape and fluctuating weather conditions. "Our project engineers developed various scenarios that would allow us to achieve permit requirements and increase capacity during periods of peak wet weather. We took them to the public," shares Tom Skjelstad, general manager "and they didn't like it - at first."

That's when DSPUD realized that they needed to change their public outreach approach and contacted a consultant to assist. "Our message was not resonating with the public. We knew the next few years would be rough if we didn't find a way to at least bring folks into the middle. They didn't have to love the project, but they needed to accept it," said Tom. "And, the greater hope, to love it."

"People, and not just ratepayers, want to feel they have a say in the matter," said Jennifer Harrison, the consultant who led the outreach and involvement process. "If you convey true sincerity and give people multiple avenues to comment and genuinely be involved, then I've found the public will support your project." In Donner Summit, that is exactly what happened.

Tom and his team reached out to environmental group leaders and neighborhood associations to hear first-hand what mattered most to them. "It was eye-opening. Of course people say they want to do what's right in terms of protecting the environment, but in most cases, ratepayers want to protect their pocketbook first," comments Tom. "But that was not true of everyone who spoke with us."

Given the new perspective, the team included the community through a series of planning workshops with the sole aim to hear and act on public comments. "We took the approach of starting

with how this project will protect the river and benefit the overall health of the community," said Jennifer. "The technical needs were to support the community's specified priorities."

Through this process, it became apparent that the common ground for groups previously thought to be at odds was the environment and, especially, protecting the environment. The river's health, it turned out, was more important to everyone than the team realized. It even overshadowed the substantial cost increase ratepayers would have to bear. It also became clear that residents wanted to preserve this natural resource for generations to come.

"When we began to scope the project, we were concerned about cost and how the community would react to the inevitable rate

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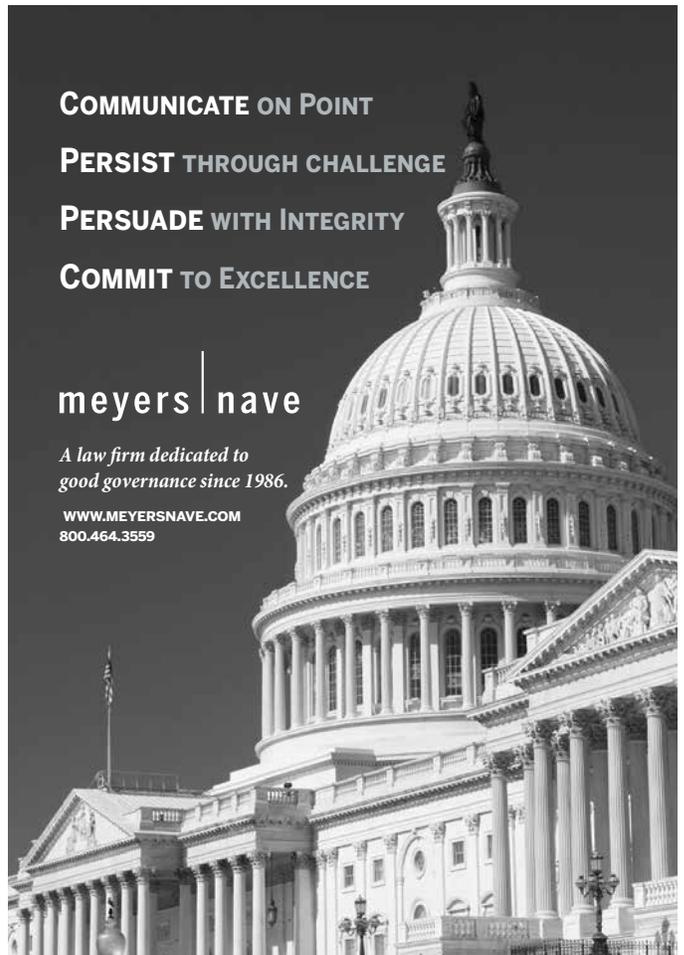
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increases. But the public accepted the rationale behind selecting treatment options that ultimately benefited the river. Cost was still a concern, but protecting this precious natural resource made it palatable to most,” explained Tom.

Emails and letters began pouring in questioning the types of chemicals in the effluent going into the South Yuba River. Community members at Donner Summit were very cautious about proceeding with any option that did not absolutely guarantee the health of the river.

One solution rose to the top. “After listening to the community, our engineers concluded that membrane bioreactors and ultra-violet light would be the best case scenario for treatment,” concluded Dr. Robert Emerick, principal at Stantec, the engineering firm of record. “This treatment would result in extremely low ammonia and nitrate levels in the treated effluent that could safely and responsibly be released into the river. And not to be forgotten as the crux of it all, this option met discharge permit requirements.”

And while the environment was foremost, the community also came to understand the need for larger capacity. “People were wary about the expansion phase of this project. A new residential neighborhood was in the planning stages and was a threat to those who already lived at Donner Summit and didn’t want to see major growth of tract homes. We had to explain that our expansion was not an effort to support this potential, new neighborhood development, but to meet the needs of existing and approved subdivisions at full build-out.”

Through the workshops, the ratepayers gained an understanding that increased capacity was to ensure public safety, accommodate heavy fluctuations on the weekends for skiers, and ultimately protect their property values.

“We can say with confidence that the wastewater facility can now manage without worry of overflows, insufficient treatment, chemical imbalances, or other apprehensions that frequently caused our operators concern,” said Tom.

With the new improvements, DSPUD’s wastewater treatment plant can now process up to 1.27 MGD on a peak day and in all weather conditions. Newly installed boilers heat the influent keeping the micro-organisms and sensitive biological treatment process in balance during extreme temperature swings.

After almost six years of planning, engineering, and constructing the wastewater treatment plant, construction finally concluded in June 2015.

“This calls for a celebration,” said Cathy Preis, DSPUD’s board president. “It’s important we recognized this amazing community for its efforts, commitment, and focus to work with us.”

The community came out in full force. Over 100 community members, local political constituents, local association representatives and board members mixed, mingled, and reflected on years of hard work.

By the Numbers

196 – Gallons of water Californians use on average per day

196



DSPUD staff greeted folks at different buildings throughout the plant. “It was great to have an opportunity to show people right up close what they invested in and how it all works,” commented Jim King, DSPUD’s plant manager. “I think they were impressed.”

Among the many in attendance included Placer County Supervisor Jennifer Montgomery who shared an official, yet heartfelt proclamation. “Therefore let it be known that on this day, July 18, 2015, Placer County Supervisor Jennifer Montgomery who is also a ratepayer in the local water district and a direct beneficiary of the upgraded wastewater treatment facility, commends the Donner Summit Public Utility District and all its partners on a job well done that benefits the environment, the economy and the social fabric of our community.”

Not to be overlooked was DSPUD’s staff, who played an integral role during the entire process. “For two years, this project has been under construction. Thank you to my operations staff. You have exceeded all my expectations, but I am not surprised. I couldn’t be more proud to be a part of this project,” praised Tom.

DSPUD built the trust and was able to shine in the end with its accomplishments. “From the community, ratepayers, project team, and plant staff, this was certainly a job well-done,” concluded Tom. ■



ABOUT THE DONNER SUMMIT PUBLIC UTILITY DISTRICT

The Donner Summit Public Utility District (DSPUD) provides water and wastewater treatment for the Donner Summit area (Placer and Nevada counties) in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. The DSPUD strives to serve and treat water to the benefit of our environment including the human, animal and plant life within our watershed and beyond. For more information, visit www.dspud.com.



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