

Cambria's Sustainable Water Facility The SWF and the G-Word

SUMMARY

- Opposition to new water-supply projects in Cambria has come mainly from fear of rampant growth.
- Those fears have no basis in fact.
- The CCSD's Water Master Plan of 2008 established a policy of retiring most of Cambria's vacant lots to sharply limit the town's ultimate size.
- A number of other laws are on the books to limit future building. These include land use restrictions, a ban on selling CCSD water outside Cambria and legal limits on Cambria's water production. We do *not* need to keep water scarce in order to limit growth.
- Modest growth consistent with the Water Master Plan will also expand funding for necessary capital improvements and operating expenses of the CCSD while avoiding the risk of expensive litigation from lot owners.
- What will Cambria look like with the SWF in regular operation? Much like it looks today, with its character and environment intact but with an even more vibrant residential and business community.

Past Fears, Present Facts

Cambria is a wonderful place to live. What makes it that way is a rare combination of urban and rural qualities. It offers the amenities of a good-sized town without the noise and crowded feel of a city. We live close to nature here without being isolated from conveniences. Compared to coastal urban areas to the north and south, Cambria and its surroundings are remarkably undeveloped. It's a rare treasure.

Opponents of the Sustainable Water Facility—or water projects generally—say that improving Cambria's water security will result in rampant population growth that will soon destroy the quality of life in our community as well as our natural environment. But, for a number of reasons significant and uncontrolled growth is simply not possible.

Under policies enacted in the past two decades, there is simply no way that the use of the SWF to provide water security will lead to the sort of growth that project

opponents argue will occur. The most that can be expected is a modest annual increase in new homes leading to full “build-out” in about 20 years. At that point, with the number of homes roughly 20% above today’s total, new water and sewer connections will stop. Any new homes built after that will be replacements for old ones. Growth will stop.

Cambria’s Shrinking Build-out

Two decades ago, Cambria’s growth potential looked radically different from what it is now. In 1999, San Luis Obispo County planners estimated that our community could grow to a population of 26,237 if all of its 11,701 lots were developed (3,783 of them were developed at the time, about the same total as now). This obviously would have resulted in a far different Cambria from the one we know.

Back then, as now, Cambrians had different ideas about how to keep the town from bursting at the seams. Some believed – and, clearly, still do – that the only way to keep growth in check was to keep water scarce. But others saw that Cambria could have both water security and limited growth. These included the CCSD Board members who believed that Cambria could build a desalinization plant and still hold the ultimate build-out to a reasonable level. Their desal plan was stymied, but they did establish a durable framework for capping growth.

In 2008, as part of its Water Master Plan, the CCSD adopted a build-out target of 4,650 residential units – slightly more than enough to accommodate the lot owners who had positions on the CCSD’s waiting list for water and sewer connections. That limit remains in effect and has been reiterated as CCSD policy in the environmental impact report submitted with the SWF’s application for a regular Coastal Development Permit.

The key to limiting Cambria’s build-out is to reduce the number of buildable lots. There are many ways to retire vacant lots, and the CCSD has already made considerable progress in shrinking the supply of them. Many of the nearly 8,000 vacant lots identified by the County in 1999 were never suitable for building in the first place. Several hundred parcels have been eliminated through mergers, which the CCSD has encouraged. Others have been placed under permanent conservation easements.

By now the number of parcels that need to be retired is down to 1,377. The CCSD Board has not settled on a plan to complete this task, and some public financing may be required. The good news is that, whatever strategy is adopted, Cambria probably has at least 20 years to execute it. We are confident that this goal will be achieved.

The Best Option: A Bit Above Zero Growth

Why not just try a little harder and stop all building of new homes? Why not leave Cambria exactly as it is now? Our answer is that a zero-growth policy may not be achievable, and certainly would not be cheap. Slow growth to a pre-determined cap is the best policy for several reasons, including:

Respecting the legal claims of waitlisted lot owners. The lots on Cambria’s water/wastewater waiting list have been there for more than 30 years. During that time the owners have paid annual fees to the CCSD (along with property taxes) based on the expectation that they would eventually be able to build. We believe it would be legally risky, and potentially very costly, to declare now that the waiting list is null and void.

Avoiding the cost of retiring more lots. There are 665 single-family and 35 multi-family positions on the waiting list. It’s unlikely that the CCSD could refuse to grant them water and sewer connections without some kind of compensation.

Paying for Cambria’s infrastructure. A modest annual increase in new connections would not only add to the customer base but, more dramatically, would generate much-needed revenue to help upgrade Cambria’s aging water and wastewater systems. The current CCSD connection charges are \$12,688 for each new water meter and \$7,161 or \$9,330 (depending on location) for a sewer hookup. A 1% growth rate would allow 38 new connections a year, eventually rising to over 40. Thirty-eight connections would produce \$482,144 for water and between \$272,118 and \$354,540 for wastewater. This money would pay for a large part of the capital improvement programs (CIPs) for both systems – more half the projected water CIP, in fact. Without it, current customers would have to make up the difference in higher rates.

In short, the best option for Cambria’s current residents is a modest rate of new construction – not so much that Cambria’s special qualities are threatened, but not so little that Cambrians have to shoulder excessive and unnecessary costs.

No-Sprawl Zoning and Other Constraints

The build-out limit is not the only constraint on Cambria’s growth. San Luis Obispo County, which controls land use in and around the community, has adopted ordinances and other measures to assure that development anywhere in the County proceeds at very modest rates. Further, the County limits the land around Cambria to agricultural uses. This zoning prevents residential or commercial development for many miles beyond the “urban reserve line” (URL)

that surrounds Cambria's already built-up neighborhoods. It serves as a two-way buffer against sprawl, either from Cambria outward or from other areas in Cambria's direction. Unlike Carmel, for instance, Cambria will remain far from other towns or cities (the nearest is Cayucos, 13 miles away) and will be barred from expanding into undeveloped land.

Cambria residents added an extra element of sprawl prevention in 2006 when they passed a measure that bars the CCSD (without voter approval) from selling potable water outside the district's service area. This means that anyone wanting to develop land outside the Cambria URL not only faces unfavorable zoning but also lacks access to CCSD water.

These rules guarantee that Cambria will become no larger in area. The one thing that does the most to make rampant growth possible – raw land – won't be available.

At the state level, Cambria's growth will face a further restraint through legal limits on the water that it can pump from its two aquifers, San Simeon Creek and Santa Rosa Creek. State water authorities are finalizing a license limit the CCSD's water production to just under 800 acre-feet a year from San Simeon and just over 200 acre-feet from Santa Rosa. This allocation is enough to ensure a secure water supply for the planned build-out of 4,650 residential connections, but no more than that.

Cambria in 20 Years: Same Town, Same Look, Same Feel

We believe all Cambrians want to preserve the qualities that make this place so special. Disagreements are not about that goal, but about how to achieve it. We do not believe that it is necessary to create scarcity and sacrifice in order to regulate growth, nor do we believe that a modest increase in the number of homes is harmful. After all, 80% of the development of Cambria already has occurred. The remaining 20% will not change Cambria's character in any significant way.

In fact, we can predict with confidence how Cambria actually will look 20 years from now, assuming that the SWF is operating regularly and the build-out process is more or less complete.

First, the sight we all love to see – that of the town of Cambria appearing amid open fields as we approach it on Highways 1 and 46 – will be just the same.

Second, as we drive through Cambria's residential neighborhoods we will see some new homes here and there, some built on vacant lots and some built to replace older homes. But we won't see a jarring difference. Strict land-use

regulations will keep the new homes at an appropriate scale – on the small side, like most of the vacant lots. And the retirement or merging of lots will ensure that they have plenty of space around them. Cambria will be slightly denser but not crowded.

Third, as we drive through the business districts on Main Street, we will see plenty of activity and few if any empty storefronts. Traffic will ebb and flow with tourism, just as it does now. The slightly larger full-time population will make little difference, except in a good way as a support for local businesses, such as grocery stores, that serve a local clientele.

Finally, we will find the coastline and open spaces well preserved and protected. One benefit of the build-out will be more revenue from taxes and water and sewer charges. Spent wisely, this money could go to fund management of the Monterey Pine forest, environmentally advanced wastewater treatment and better fire protection.

In short, the fears of the past do not apply to the Cambria of the future. Growth is not a threat. The real threat, which the SWF addresses, is that of having too little water for a safe, healthy and economically viable community.

Cambrians for Water Steering Committee