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## Suburbs to San Francisco: Get going -- fix water system

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Two years after the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (PUC) approved a \$3.6 billion plan to upgrade the dilapidated Hetch-Hetchy system that provides water to 2.4 million people in four counties, suburban water agencies are getting nervous that not much seems to be happening.

"We must act to eliminate the risk for a human and economic catastrophe, if this system fails," Redwood City Councilman Ira Ruskin told San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom at a meeting June 28. "We look to you now for leadership."

Mr. Ruskin led a delegation of 12 suburban water officials to urge Mayor Newsom to take charge, and rescue the 14-year project from the bureaucracy that is already falling behind schedule. Mr. Ruskin chairs the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency (BAWSCA), an agency created two years ago to give some clout to the 28 water agencies in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties that buy water wholesale from San Francisco.

The suburbs consume -- and pay for -- two-thirds of the 260 million gallons of water per day that San Francisco delivers. Most of it comes from the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in Yosemite National Park through an aging system of pipes, pumps, tunnels, and reservoirs that cross three earthquake faults.

BAWSCA complained to Mayor Newsom about three key problems that put the projects -- and Bay Area residents -- at risk. Mr. Ruskin argued:

\*\* San Francisco may not have operational ability, management skill, or political will to fix the water delivery system on time and on budget. The project is 10 times as big as anything ever done by the SFPUC, which has been described by one commissioner as "deeply dysfunctional." The agency is just getting its seventh director in five years, he noted.

\*\* Serious errors in accounting recently led San Francisco to overcharge BAWSCA members by \$3.7 million. Citing "pervasive and serious flaws" that led to double charging for equipment and millions of dollars in improper charges, Mr. Ruskin called for an overhaul of the city's accounting system to insure accuracy.

\*\* Unreasonable delays in starting the project threaten the ability to complete it as planned. Mr. Ruskin cited delays in starting the environmental review. A consultant was only selected in January, with work to begin in March. "But the notice to the consultant to start work wasn't issued until last week," said Mr. Ruskin.

BAWSCA members attending the meeting reported that Mayor Newsom responded positively. "Mayor Newsom said he will take charge. He will take the project into his office," said Menlo Park Councilman Chuck Kinney, who serves on BAWSCA and its sister agency that will allow the suburban customers to help finance the big project. "We are worried the project will be a big mess, and be longer and more expensive than promised."

Mr. Ruskin said Mayor Newsom agreed to all three requests, and promised to provide regular progress reports, and to include BAWSCA representatives in review meetings with his staff.

"We're holding their feet to the fire," Mr. Ruskin told the Almanac. "San Francisco must fix the Hetch Hetchy system to avert a catastrophe. That system is of critical importance to the people in four counties -- including San Francisco. They are the last stop in the delivery system. They need to care as well."

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