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[Hetch Hetchy plan all clogged up](#)

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THERE WERE MANY dire predictions about potential waste, delays and cost overruns when San Francisco voters went to the polls two years ago to vote on fixing the aging Hetch Hetchy water system. Some people must get tired of being right.

Rebuilding the Bay Area's most intricate water-delivery system is proving, so far, to be a challenge for San Francisco's much-maligned Public Utilities

Commission. How daunting is it? Well, some people are likening it to the Bay Bridge retrofit, which is now entering its 15th anniversary with a statewide battle going on over the design and the projected cost soaring by billions.

Under legislation passed in 2002, if the city doesn't meet its guidelines for fixing the 167-mile system of pipes, tunnels and reservoirs that brings water to 29 local cities and counties, the state can take the authority for running it away from San Francisco -- which a number of communities and individual politicians and groups would love to do.

The alarm bells about Hetch Hetchy started going off last year, when the cheery pronouncements of the then-agency director turned out to be mostly fiction. Indeed, not only was the huge seismic-renovation plan seriously behind schedule, agency officials hadn't even determined which of the 77 individual projects involved in the retrofit were the most critical.

That's not a good situation for an agency that already had been slammed by neighboring cities for failing to address the weakening water system that serves 2.4 million Bay Area residents. And it's even more worrisome because the only certainty about the project is that the means to bring water reliably from the Sierra to the Bay Area will relentlessly decline the longer it takes to rebuild the system.

As San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom told me last week: "We've got some problems, no doubt about it. But we're starting to get a handle on them. At this point, we know that it's not coming in under budget. But we're breaking all these projects down now and we're committed to do whatever it takes to make this work."

The question now is: How much more than the \$3.6 billion San Francisco and Peninsula-city residents agreed to borrow to pay for the rebuilding will it cost? The project is under intense scrutiny now because a number of environmental groups have been pushing to tear down the dam that is the linchpin to the system in order to restore the Hetch Hetchy Valley -- a conservation dream that is unworkable and unimaginably expensive.

Yet somehow, that idea has gained enough support in Sacramento that San Francisco officials are concerned that if they're too far off their timetable to rebuild the system, they could be standing in the way of a bursting political dam.

Newsom brought in tough-minded manager Susan Leal to take over the PUC four months ago and start plugging the obvious leaks left by her predecessor. Those leaks included a published document that reveals that most of the Hetch Hetchy major projects -- which make up more than 50 percent of the total cost of the rebuild -- are at least two years behind schedule. Leal brought in uber-architect Tony Irons -- he was the driving force behind San Francisco's impressive City Hall and Opera House renovations -- to get a



realistic assessment of the progress. Leal also ordered a complete review of the rebuilding program.

Leal says that she will bring a "new" budget and construction schedule to San Francisco's PUC on Feb. 8 that is not based on individual projects "but on delivering a water system that ensures reliable service and public safety for the future." Funny, that's what everybody thought the project was for.

Given the agency's history, skepticism is inevitable. And now that the environmental lobby has joined the fray, San Francisco is looking like an aging army general trying to stave off the barbarians at the (water) gate.

"Time is never on your side when you're dealing with a huge capital project," Newsom said. "This is the biggest water-related construction program in the West, and it's not an immodest challenge to meet. But we're going to do whatever it takes to keep Hetch Hetchy in San Francisco's hands -- this is a legacy project for the city. For us not to pull this off would be unthinkable. "

Leal said she believes the PUC can still complete the rebuilding program by its stated target date of 2015, though she admits the agency is playing catch-up.

A city that boasts of engineering marvels like Hetch Hetchy and the Golden Gate Bridge had better hope that the creative well hasn't run dry.

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