

## A water park during California's drought? Let it slide

On the first day of April, for many Californians, the drought finally hit home.

They saw a photo of their governor in a brown meadow that should have been buried under five feet of snow. The snowpack, which eventually fills our reservoirs, had disappeared. Gov. Jerry Brown announced a 25% mandatory reduction in water use.

In a case of what seemed like spectacularly bad timing, Dublin had just broken ground on a new water park. When the project is complete, there will be two pools. A water playground with a fake beach. And six 125-foot water slides shooting off a main tower.

The [headlines](#) were startling: "Dublin Builds Water Park Amid Drought." "East Bay Residents Unhappy Over \$36M Water Park Construction."

[For Sierra resident, the well runs dry -- along with her options](#)

Quiet, suburban Dublin is not used to bad press. The only other time the city made [big news](#) was in 2010, when a cantaloupe-size cannonball fired by the zany science show "MythBusters" went off course and ripped through a neighborhood, tearing up a house and landing on a minivan. (No one was hurt.)

That was strange. But in a way, news of the water park seemed even stranger. How could a city in environmentally sensitive Northern California so blithely ignore our looming water doomsday? How could it act so SoCal?

Even little kids were perplexed.

"Kind of weird," a boy named Evan Rusconi told a local TV news reporter. "I mean it's a drought. Why are they going to use all that water for a water park?"

Phil Duncan, 41, a father of two who lives a few blocks from the park, started an online petition demanding the city cease construction.

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"I just wanted to create some awareness, kick up some noise," he told me. "I don't hear anyone clamoring for a water park."

But if his goal was to foment opposition, the petition has fallen short. Of Dublin's 55,000 residents, only 162 have signed. Those who did sign, though, were brutal.

"At a time of historic drought," wrote Maria Milenkovic, "it is an arrogant, tone deaf project, totally disrespectful of ecological and environmental concerns."

Or is it?

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Dublin is one of those California towns that was pretty much farmland until the 1960s, when it started to boom along with the rest of the state. In the last 15 years, the population has grown nearly 60%.

I just wanted to create some awareness, kick up some noise. I don't hear anyone clamoring for a water park. - Phil Duncan, a Dublin resident who started a petition against the water park

San Francisco and Silicon Valley professionals who have been priced out of the exorbitant real estate markets there can easily commute to their jobs about 30 miles away. Dublin has two BART stations and lies at the intersection of two interstate highways. The tech company shuttles that have antagonized so many San Franciscans ruffle no feathers here, where the average household income is \$139,000.

On Wednesday, I chatted with two officials at Dublin City Hall. Lori Taylor is the city's economic development director and doubles as its spokeswoman. Paul McCreary is the parks and community services director.

Understandably, they're feeling a bit stung by the controversy. After all, this is really a community aquatic center — not a water park on the scale of a Raging Waters. It has been planned for a decade. When the park opens in 2017, drought willing, they anticipate about 500 daily visitors, with perhaps as many as 1,000 on very hot summer days.

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Dublin, they said, is deeply committed to sustainability. Cars in the City Hall lot park under solar panels. Eighty percent of the water used by the city — on its fields, parks, golf courses and medians — is recycled water, saving more than 150 million gallons each year.

"This city is on the cutting edge with our use of recycled water," Taylor said.

I confirmed this with Sue Stephenson, spokeswoman for the local water agency, the Dublin San Ramon Services District. Dublin residents, she said, have cut water use by an impressive 36% in the last year. In California, the average water use was 91 gallons per person per day in April, according to the State Water Resources Control Board. Dublin has averaged less than 70 gallons a day for the last year, Stephenson said.

More than 1,500 residents, she said, regularly irrigate their gardens by lugging home free recycled water from the district.

Cities all around us have big swimming pools or aquatic centers. Why shouldn't Dublin? - Sue Stephenson, spokeswoman for the local water agency

"Let's have an aquatic center so our community can enjoy themselves on hot summer days," Stephenson said. "Cities all around us have big swimming pools or aquatic centers. Why shouldn't Dublin?"

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For an answer from an outside expert, I called Celeste Cantú, general manager of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, which coordinates water agencies along the Santa Ana River from Big Bear to Huntington Beach.

Cantú didn't think the 480,000 potable gallons it will take to fill the water park's pools sounded excessive.

"It can be done right," said Cantú, an avid swimmer who uses a public pool. "In some communities, water is so tight, it's absolutely ludicrous to even think about building a backyard pool. In others, their water source is not as stressed, so maybe that's the kind of thing you can make an argument for."

She noted that swimming — and exercise generally — is an important component of public health efforts, especially in the fight against childhood obesity.

And this, I think, is where Dublin has a very strong case.

The town has one public pool. It is used by a high school swim team, by kids learning to swim and by seniors taking exercise classes. It can serve only 2,000 children a year with lessons, McCreary said. The most recent census found

nearly 12,000 kids age 14 and younger in Dublin.

The pool is not deep enough for water polo or diving blocks.

"Our poor high school swimmers," McCreary said. "They go to other schools for meets and don't have the advantage of having practiced with diving blocks."

That got to me. In sweltering places, cooling off in a deep public swimming pool brings the kind of joy you just don't get from an air-conditioned mall.

Dublin has done more to save water than most other cities. It deserves a break.

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