

A dam across Carquinez Strait?

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During the early 20th century, San Francisco Bay area officials considered many different ideas to resolve a dwindling supply of fresh water and the encroachment of saline waters into the bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Because of inadequate rainfall in the Delta region, early settlers began to irrigate their fields from local water sources. Eventually more fresh water was being taken than could be renewed during the rainy season. Increased salinity of delta water damaged the rich agricultural soils of Solano and Contra Costa counties, costing the area millions of dollars.

As demand continued to grow from increased farming, ranching and industry, public outcry began to insist that “wasted” water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta River flowing seaward be saved for irrigation purposes. Threats of impending lawsuits forced some interesting solutions to the problem.

One of the solutions suggested was to dam the Carquinez Strait. Solano and Contra Costa counties were in the forefront in supporting a salt-water barrier or dam across the straits.

With the passing of the Reclamation Act in 1902, the funding for the barrier became more of a possibility as irrigation projects became federal reclamation projects.

The dream was nearer reality in September 1923, when California appropriated \$10,000 for a salt-water dam survey and an additional \$20,000 was contributed by the U.S. Reclamation Service. All that was required for the project was another \$10,000 to be raised by local land owners and businesses that would benefit from the undertaking as required by Bureau of Reclamation rules.

By early December 1923, only \$4,000 remained to be raised and a final push was initiated to raise the rest of the funds. The money was in hand in March 1924 and announcements were made that the first of three surveys would begin.

Three possible areas beyond the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers had been chosen as sites for the dam.

The most-favored choice to build was the Army Point site near Benicia, followed by

Dillon Point near Southhampton Bay and finally the San Pablo Point site near Richmond. All the sites were to be surveyed by Walter R. Young, who had recently completed surveys that resulted in the building of Hoover Dam a few years later.

Two other projects were being considered by the Bureau of Reclamation. The Kennett Dam in Iron Canyon near Red Bluff, and water supply pumps and lifts for the San Joaquin Valley. A total of \$122 million was proposed for the three projects.

The surveys were completed by the end of 1924 and prospects for the Carquinez Strait barrier at Army Point looked promising.

Delays in planning and decisions, however, dragged on for the next few years as could be expected for any government projects of this size.

Finally in December 1928, it appeared the dam would be built at Army Point near today's Benicia-Martinez Bridge.

An informal meeting of the Salt Water Barrier Association to illustrate the importance of the barrier was held with Governor Young. Solano County was represented by Mayor Edward Dinkelspiel of Suisun, E.L. Dearborn, William Pierce, William Meyers, Walter Bickford, Attorney K.I. Jones and D.A. Weir, all of whom had been intimately involved in the project since its inception.

But there was still opposition as the year wore on. Finally in mid-1929, Suisun's Assemblyman Earnest Crowley declared he would fight the legislative water committee's \$109-million bonding proposal for construction of the Kennett Dam, the San Joaquin pump and lift system, and \$15-million aid for Santa Ana flood control unless the Carquinez water barrier was included.

Finally, in May 1929, the Bay Barrier was accepted. Senators William Sharkey of Contra Costa County and Thomas McCormack of Solano County announced a decisive victory. The Salt Water Barrier was accepted in its entirety and made a part of the state-wide water conservation project.

Reports surfaced later in the year indicating the amount of water that would be stored by the barrier would not be sufficient for the needs of industry and agriculture.

Then, on Jan. 14, 1930, President Hoover and the engineer in charge, Walter R. Young put an end to any further progress toward the project, saying it was too expensive. The Kennett Dam would be built instead.

It is interesting to note that in the following year, northern California suffered a severe

drought. Crop irrigation and industry used so much water from the Sacramento River that the flow of water dropped to zero during the year because of the limited rainfall. Damage from salt water incursion in the delta region caused an estimated \$1.5 million in damage.

The idea of a dam somewhere in the bay didn't completely die in the ensuing years.

The Reber Plan would have constructed a barrier from San Francisco to Oakland and filled in much of San Francisco Bay.

The Swanson Plan, proposed in 1959, called for a dam across Carquinez Strait and the majority of the bay to be filled in by leveling San Bruno Mountain as a source of material. One plan even called for building a barrier across the Golden Gate.

Needless to say, none of the plans ever became reality and all such speculation died with the environmental movements increasing power by 1962.

Today, The Central Valley Project (CVA) is an outgrowth of all the past attempts to control our use and conservation of fresh water. Instead of the salt water barrier at Carquinez Strait we have Monticello dam, Folsom dam, Shasta dam, Oroville dam and canals that feed water to the San Joaquin Valley and beyond among the many projects of the CVA.

Controversy still exists as southern California lusts for the water of northern California. Water is more important to life and progress than gold and increasing pressure to conserve and protect the environment is making any new proposals more controversial and costly to accomplish.

Who knows. Maybe some day there will still be a Carquinez Salt Water Barrier in California's future in one form or other as the need for water defines the future of our State and livelihood. History just happens to have a habit of repeating itself in many ways.

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