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The Coastal Branch: A Cautionary Tale

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The sales pitch for the Twin Tunnels is a lot like the spiels of the patent medicine men who roamed the Old West, hawking bogus remedies to credulous settlers along the frontier. In this case, though, what's being hyped isn't a cure-all tonic – it's a panacea for all our water woes.

Don't buy it. We've heard this all before, with the Coastal Branch of the State Water Project. Its story provides some broad insights into the flawed reasoning behind California's water conveyance system. It also serves as a red flag, warning us all of the folly of Jerry Brown's Twin Tunnels project.

In 1991, Central Coast residents – including those served by water agencies in Santa Barbara, Montecito, Carpinteria, and Goleta – responded positively to state overtures for a subsidiary canal to bring State water from the California Aqueduct to Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

As advocates for the "Coastal Branch" presented it, the project made sense. Costs were pegged at \$270 million – a tolerable price tag for ratepayers. And for the first time, it seemed, Central Coast residents would enjoy true water security, free from the shortages and rationing that loom during the region's periodic droughts.

But that's not how things played out. The Coastal Branch was constructed – but at a final cost of \$1.76 billion, not \$270 million. Costs were underestimated: proponents failed to reveal interest on the debt, and over runs in both planning and construction were extravagant. The result has been a crushing economic burden for the region's ratepayers, one that is literally generational; it will take up to 40 years to pay off.

Moreover, the Central Coast's "water security" remains as shaky as ever. The Coastal Branch, after all, did little to secure a reliable water supply for Central Coast residents. It is merely a feeder canal, a conveyance system. Whenever water shortages hit the state – which are virtually every year, given oversubscriptions to the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project – the Central Coast's allocations are cut along with those for all other contractors. Since the feeder aqueduct came on line in 1998, Central Coast ratepayers have received only 36% of their promised Coastal Branch supplies despite promises of 97% deliveries in the 1991 countywide vote.

Today, in Yogi Berra's words, it's déjà vu all over again. Once again, the state is promoting a water conveyance scheme that will solve all our problems -- even though its proponents admit it provides no new water. The Twin Tunnels, advocates vow, will provide water security and protect the Delta -- and at a reasonable cost. Brown pushed a near-identical scheme during his first tenure as governor in the 1980s; but Californians saw through the persiflage, and rejected the so-called Peripheral Canal at the polls.

Now, claiming he needs legacy projects to cap his long political career, Brown is back, pushing the same basic scheme -- albeit one dolled up with a little lipstick and a few ribbons. He's even couched the project in a document titled the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

The Twin Tunnels have nothing to do with conservation or new water supplies, and everything to do with soaking ratepayers to benefit powerful agribusiness interests south of the Delta. Ultimately, the lion's share of the water from the Twin Tunnels will be used to irrigate the highly toxic, selenium-impaired soils of the western and southern San Joaquin Valley, while permanently degrading the Bay/Delta.

And what's the bottom line for rank-and-file ratepayers? Grim. Santa Barbara County alone will be forced to pony up an additional \$1.77 billion to \$7.84 billion through 2060 to finance the Twin Tunnels. Of course, that's in addition to the \$1.76 billion county ratepayers will have to spend through 2035 for the Coastal Branch.

Brown learned his lesson from the Peripheral Canal in the 1980s, and he's not going to risk the Twin Tunnels by subjecting them to the will of the people. Implementation of the project rests solely with the Department of Water Resources, not on voter approval. But this costly and environmentally destructive boondoggle can still be stopped. The courts are one avenue.

Grassroots resistance also will help stop the Twin Tunnels. Several California counties already have made their opposition to the Bay Delta Conservation Plan known. Santa Barbara County -- still stung from the Coastal Branch imbroglio -- appears on the cusp of doing the same with urging from C-WIN. For people who care about fiscal responsibility and environmental stability, that can only be construed as good news.

In sum, it's not too late. We can -- we must -- stop this thing.

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