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Forum on water agrees: Plan now

Experts debate supply, cost in Tucson's future

By Tom Beal

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Arizona's water managers said at a forum Friday that there's plenty of water to sustain growth in the state's urban areas, but it will come at a cost — in dollars, diminished quality and possible growth limits in rural areas.

Other experts at the Tucson Community Conversation on Water questioned those assurances. A sustained drought and rising temperatures could increase demand while supply evaporates, they said.

We need to plan for an uncertain future, all agreed.

The "conversation" on water — a single-topic continuation of the bigger-picture Tucson Regional Town Hall convened earlier this year by the Southern Arizona Leadership Council — was co-sponsored by area water groups and the Pima Association of Governments.

Peter Likins, former University of Arizona president and chairman of the Tucson Regional Town Hall, told participants that if we don't confront water issues now, "Fifteen to 20 years from now we will be in crisis."

Kathy Jacobs, who heads the intrauniversity Arizona Water Institute, said that crisis may hit us quickly.

Jacobs, formerly director of the state agency that balances the Tucson area's water withdrawals, said she is undergoing a "shifting understanding of water facts."

Jacobs said the watershed deficits of the past 10 years and new "tree-ring-based hydrology" that points to the possibility of "decades-long drought" are alarming.

Couple that with rising temperatures from climate change and you get a rapid acceleration of shortages in the state's principal source of groundwater replenishment — the Colorado River.

The public already assumes that growth will sap water supply, said Carol Zimmerman, an elected member of the board that manages the Central Arizona Project, which conveys water from the Colorado to Tucson and other areas of the state.

Zimmerman also co-owns the consulting firm hired to run the public-relations campaign against a city ballot proposal that would prohibit new water connections when Tucson Water's deliveries nearly match its CAP allotment.

She called Proposition 200, which will be decided Nov. 6, "a bad way to make water policy," but said the region will have to address the issue it raises, win or lose.

"People are concerned about growth and water policy," she said. "They are asking, 'If not this, what?'"

Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, who shared the stage with Tucson City Manager Mike Hein, said the county plans to link land-use planning to water availability and water-conservation measures.

Hein said he doesn't disbelieve the experts who say we can double our regional population without adversely affecting water supplies, but he doesn't think we can do so without hurting schools, transportation systems and other infrastructure that already lags growth.

"Your water is the first thing that comes to mind, but it's a lot more than that," Hein said.

Growth and water have always been linked, said Ken Seasholes, head of the Tucson management area of the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

The goal of the 1980 Ground Water Management Act, upon which Arizona water law is based, was to allow the state to grow, he said.

Seasholes said the law dictates that the state's growth not increase the overdraft of its water supplies — and it won't, he said. But getting water will become more difficult and more expensive, and the quality will suffer, he said.

The state's growth predictions assume that "we're not going to run out of anything," said Pima Association of Governments population expert Dave Taylor.

Taylor said, however, that the rate of growth will slow. It has to, he said. "If extrapolated into the next century, at least two-thirds of the world's population will live in Phoenix," he joked.

Nevada has proved that you can provide water for any population if you put enough money and political muscle into it, said keynote speaker Rita Maguire, a consultant whose law firm specializes in water law and policy.

Nevada used to have laws forbidding transfer of water from one basin to another, and now Clark County is mining two other aquifers to supply Las Vegas, she said. Arizona could change its laws, said Maguire, former director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

There is always a way to "find more water in a region where every drop is spoken for," Maguire said.

Larry Dozier, head of the Central Arizona Water Conservation District, said his agency is studying cloud-seeding to increase snowpack in the Colorado River watershed.

"Unfortunately, when there is a drought, there are not a lot of clouds to seed," said Dozier.

Dozier said initial estimates of river flow in the Colorado were based on wet years, and the river could experience its first shortfall on deliveries by 2011 "if it stays dry like it is."

Dozier said the shortfall would not affect deliveries of water to municipal and industrial users. "A shortage on the river is not a threat to them," Dozier said. "Maybe after 2030 it will be."

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