

Published: 10.27.2007

Helping Marana grow wisely is DeSpain's personal quest

By Aaron Mackey

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Brad DeSpain can give the location of every water line and well in Marana, though his connection to the town runs deeper than buried pipe.

The Holbrook-born rancher who settled in Marana in 1962 was a key figure in the town's incorporation push and has served as the town's voice on water issues for decades, even before its incorporation.

DeSpain, who will turn 68 on Sunday, was the head of what is now called the Cortaro-Marana Irrigation District during residents' showdown with Tucson officials over water, which prompted the incorporation effort. He's now the town's utilities director.

The powerful district, run by farmers and ranchers, controls surface water along the Santa Cruz River basin. In the last decade, the district has entered into long-term water agreements with the town that officials see as key to helping sustain Marana's growth.

Ensuring that residents could control their own destiny was the driving force behind DeSpain's involvement, he said. It's a desire that still motivates DeSpain and other town officials.

Colleagues call DeSpain unflinchingly loyal to Marana, saying he has a passion to help Marana grow in a way that is sustainable.

"When you mention Brad DeSpain, it's one of the few names I associate fully and completely with the formation of the town," said Tucson City Manager Mike Hein, who worked with DeSpain when Hein served as Marana's town manager from 1998 to 2003.

Others have dubbed DeSpain the unofficial mayor of Marana, saying he works behind the scenes to accomplish difficult tasks.

Fruits of DeSpain's labor include gaining a megawatt of electricity — equal to powering 100 50-watt light bulbs for 200 hours — for the town from a dam on the Colorado River, and securing enough water from the Central Arizona Project to give the town an assured water supply.

While DeSpain downplays his role with the town — he shrugged and laughed at the thought of being labeled Marana's unofficial mayor — he's been helping Marana leaders for generations.

He served as a water adviser to the town's first mayor, Don Frew, and educated some of today's most prominent Maranans.

DeSpain taught agricultural education at Marana High School, where two of his pupils were Ed Honea and Herb Kai, current mayor and vice-mayor of the town, respectively.

Learn more about Pima County at a million, including stories looking at how we got here and where we're headed, a mini-documentary video examining the effects of growth on the city and more videos and slide shows. **Go to go.azstarnet.com/onemillion**

They weren't the only two Marana officials to learn from DeSpain, Hein said.

His knowledge "ranges from the technical — he knows where the pipes are — to the political, and who made what decisions and had influence," Hein said.

DeSpain's reputation has allowed him to transcend politics and rise to a level similar to that of Ora Mae Harn, the former Marana mayor whom many consider the town's matriarch, one official said.

"Ora Mae exudes Marana," said Gilbert Davidson, deputy town manager. "Brad is of the same stature."

DeSpain, eschewing notions of grandeur, said his motivation is much more personal.

"It's just home, and when you're home, why, you try to work so you don't leave other generations with some of the issues that you have to deal with and maybe a little better quality of life."

Learn more about Pima County at a million, including stories looking at how we got here and where we're headed, a mini-documentary video examining the effects of growth on the city and more videos and slide shows. **Go to [go.azstarnet.com/onemillion](http://www.azstarnet.com/onemillion)**

All content copyright © 1999-2007 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.