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GV residents split over possible pipeline

By Tim Ellis

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A group of Green Valley residents believe the dispute over a proposed water pipeline could help solve the overpumping of the area's groundwater.

Like the rest of the community, members of the Citizen's Water Action Coalition are divided over whether to support an offer by a Canadian-based mining company to build the pipeline at no cost for the Community Water Co. of Green Valley.

Many in the community, and in the greater Tucson area, suspect Canadian-based Augusta Resource Corp.'s offer to build the pipeline is an effort to buy off opposition to its proposal to develop an open-pit copper mine in a scenic and ecologically sensitive area in the Santa Rita Mountains.

But the dispute over the offer to build the approximately 7-mile pipeline from the Central Arizona Project terminus north of Sahuarita "has focused attention on our water problems," said Peggy Bonthron, a Green Valley resident and water consultant.

Tom Wade, a community leader and mine opponent, agrees.

"The threat of the mine has been a catalyst for getting something done about the water problem," said Wade, the first vice president of the Green Valley Community Coordinating Council. The council serves as a sort of unofficial governing body for the Green Valley.

Bonthron, who worked for a Santa Ana, Calif.,-area water authority for 13 years, is one of several residents who have proposed forming a similar entity for the Green Valley-Sahuarita area.

"The pipeline is important," she said Friday. "But the more important thing at this point is for all of us to come together and solve the bigger problem."

A water authority would bring together several "stakeholders" — including large water users, such as mines and agricultural operations, as well as water companies and local governments — to finally accomplish the elusive task of bringing CAP water farther south to help replenish the area's aquifer.

That would relieve the problem of overpumping of the area's groundwater that is causing the water table to drop more than 2 feet per year.

"We've got to do things differently, or we'll have a train wreck," Bonthron said after a Friday meeting that at one point turned into a shouting match between fans and foes of Augusta's proposed pipeline.

That followed a talk by Pima County Supervisor Ray Carroll, one of the most vocal critics of Augusta's mining proposals, who railed against its offer to build the pipeline, which Community Water Co. officials estimate will cost up to \$15 million.

"Mines have been the single biggest cause of the 2-foot drop in the groundwater here," said Carroll, who's often spoken out on the environmental damage caused by mining.

"So let's help another mine get started," he said, sarcastically.

"I am and will continue to be opposed," Carroll said to the applause and shouts of approval by many in the crowd.

But others tried to keep the focus on how to solve the overpumping of groundwater.

June Wortman, a Green Valley resident active in the water issue and other causes, asked Carroll about whether he could propose other sources of funding to bring CAP water into the area, including the county.

Carroll said the problem "is a state issue" and added that he has urged many residents to talk with Sen. Tim Bee, a fellow Tucson Republican and state Senate majority leader.

The county doesn't have the money to build a pipeline although it could contribute funding through its bonding capacity, for example, Carroll said.

But county funding for such a pipeline would depend on the other four members of the Board of Supervisors, said Carroll, who represents much of the Green Valley-Sahuarita area.

But, that can't happen unless local residents organize and approach the county and state for funding, he said.

Arturo Gabaldon, Community Water's president, said Friday evening that company officials would be interested in "looking into" and possibly participating in the formation of a water authority. Community Water, which serves 11,500 homes in Green Valley and Sahuarita, is the largest of six companies that serve the area.

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