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A closer look at the questions

Tucsonans speak out on water supply, growth and other issues facing the region

1. Will we run out of water?

By 54-46 percent, respondents said Southern Arizona lacks the water to sustain growth trends over the next 15 years.

What experts and officials say: Tucson has enough water for the next 15 years and longer, says a study by Sharon Megdal, director of the University of Arizona Water Resources Research Center. At the worst, we won't need new supplies until 2030 or 2035, she said.

Tucson Water's spokesman, Mitch Basefsky, isn't so sure. If growth continues as expected, if we don't reduce per capita water use by 10 percent, and if the utility serves water to anyone requesting it, "We may need our next bucket by 2017," he said.

But if Tucson Water stops serving newcomers outside the city limits and reduces per capita use 10 percent, the next supply won't be needed until 2032, he said. New supplies could come from desalination, imports, recycling more wastewater, buying water rights from farmers or other means, officials have said.

The term "running out of water" is not accurate for Tucson, said Val Little, director of the Water Conservation Alliance of Southern Arizona. "We're sitting on a huge aquifer," she said. But it gets more expensive to pump as you drill deeper, new water supplies could be expensive, and residents may have to pay more for water even while using less of it, she said.

Quote from a survey respondent: Larry Wharton, a retired professor living in the Catalina Foothills, doesn't believe there's 15 years' worth of water left here. "I'm not 100 percent sure that I can rely on what people say about the availability of water. My rational sense is there is a finite amount, and the Colorado River seems to be providing less and less water over time."

2. Can treated wastewater be made safe for drinking?

By 51-30 percent, with 19 percent saying they don't know, respondents said "yes," it can be.

What experts and officials say: The technology exists to do it, but it's going to cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build a treatment plant, said Tucson Water's Basefsky.

Some critics say there may be troublesome compounds in wastewater, such as traces of pharmaceuticals, that won't be found until technology is more advanced. Basefsky countered, "You can't prove a negative. If technology doesn't exist to monitor it, you can never be 100 percent sure."

Starting this year, Orange County, Calif., is taking treated sewer water and cleaning it a second time using technology that renders the water almost distilled, exceeding all state and federal drinking standards, officials say. *See story, A15.*

Quote from a survey respondent: Joe Quintana, a self-employed construction remodeler who lives near East Broadway and Wilmot Road, believes it can be treated safely, although he hears many people say, "I can't drink that." "

"If they can engineer it, it's just in your mind," he said, comparing the "yuck factor" to Americans' aversion to eating bugs even though people in many parts of the world eat them for the nutrition.

"Arizona and Tucson have put out reports saying that they can clean up the water (for drinking), and we may

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have to do it someday," Quintana said.

3. Is Southern Arizona's economic future based on population growth?

By 60-31 percent, with 9 percent saying they don't know, respondents said "no."

What experts and officials say: Marshall Vest, director of business research at UA's Eller School of Management, said he would have answered "yes."

A good deal of Tucson's economic growth this past decade was fueled by rapid population growth, he said. Most of the region's job growth didn't appear to come from export-based sectors of the economy, he said.

"It looks as though population was accounting for and providing the growth. It wasn't that we developed good jobs and population followed behind; it was that population came here irrespective of the jobs in the last decade," Vest said.

Quote from a survey respondent: Like the majority of poll respondents, Colleen Crombie, who lives near Sabino Canyon, said she doesn't think the economy here depends on population growth. Nor should it, she said.

"We've got good resources here now," said Crombie, CEO for Poly-Tex Inc., a Minnesota-based firm that manufactures greenhouses for big-box stores.

"We've got good people, very fine education going on at the university, all the projects coming out for the Hubble Telescope, and Raytheon keeps growing. Just use what we have, use things like solar more. My gosh, we've got this free sunshine all the time."

4. What trade-offs are acceptable in return for saving the desert?

By 87-6 percent, with 7 percent saying they don't know, respondents said they do not support mass grading of the desert for development.

As an alternative, 44 percent favor a combination of taller buildings using less ground space, homes closer together so more land stays open and larger, and more open lots with higher home prices.

What the experts and officials say: The Southern Arizona Home Builders Association and the Southern Arizona Leadership Council didn't like this question, partly because it does not explain that builders in much of this metro area already face government guidelines or restrictions on grading. To get a rezoning of sensitive land in unincorporated Pima County, for instance, builders typically must agree to set aside 65 percent to 95 percent as open space.

Builders in many area cities and towns also must leave a percentage of native plants standing, up to 30 percent, or replace them.

Jim Kiser, a spokesman for the leadership council, said it is not fair to ask the grading question without adding the context that most people living here already live on land where the desert was graded.

Quote from a survey respondent: "These bladed and graded lots with houses 10 feet apart are really not desirable. They've taken everything away," said Betty Ervin, a Northeast Side resident. "There's a difference between mass grading with nothing left of the desert and grading enough just for the footprint of your home."

5. Should limits be placed on building permits to conserve water?

By 71-23 percent, respondents said "yes."

What the officials and experts say: Legally, that's difficult or impossible to do, many local officials said. Under Proposition 207, approved by Arizona voters in 2006, local governments can't refuse to issue building permits on land already zoned for new development unless they compensate the landowner, said Pima County Supervisor Sharon Bronson.

"If they have the zoning and a piece of paper from Tucson Water saying that they have a 100-year supply, we by law have to give them a building permit," Bronson said.

Under a new state law, county governments can disapprove new developments lying outside a state-run

water Active Management Area for lack of water. But most of the growth in Pima County is occurring inside the Tucson Active Management Area, where the law doesn't apply, Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said.

A new project can be denied in unincorporated Pima County for lack of water only if the development needs a rezoning, under a provision in the county Comprehensive Land Use Plan adopted last year. Whether the Board of Supervisors will enforce this is "the question of the day," said Carolyn Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.

"There will be pressure from people like me and others — we will hold their feet to the fire," she said. "More often than not, in some of the large rezonings, I think it will make a difference."

Quote from a survey respondent: Northeast Side resident Patty Burks, a retired nurse and computer programmer, said the region should limit building permits because she doesn't believe there is enough water to last the next 50 years.

"People think, 'If we have the land, we can build the house.' That's not the question. We have to have the water to build the house," said Burks, who has lived in Tucson nine years.

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