

Brenda Garcia

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Water-management strategy must include conservation

By Val Little

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A recent headline in a water-industry publication caught my eye. It read: "Ontario says no to new water supplies." Yes, a province in Canada has made a conscious decision that its search for "new" water will start with saving water and the collective efforts to realize the full potential of efficiency.

Titled "H2Ontario: A Blueprint for Comprehensive Water Conservation and Efficiency," this strategy is, to my knowledge, a first. Clearly Ontario will not be the last entity to take this approach.

As early as 2003, the Pacific Institute concluded that "it is much cheaper to conserve water and encourage efficiency than to build new water supplies or even, in some cases, expand existing ones . . . and that the savings can be had without the many social, environmental and economic consequences that any major water project will bring."

We are seeing a shift toward increased water-use efficiency as a viable alternative to the search for, the legal wrangling to acquire, and the costs (not only in dollars but to the environment and society) to buy, transport, treat and deliver that next bucket of water.

For too long conservation has been viewed by many as a feel-good or soft effort without regard to actual water savings and the attendant cost to save that water. I believe these days are on the wane and we are beginning to view conservation as a way to reduce demands on our potable water supply and to integrate demand management efforts into our overall water management strategies.

Early Arizona leaders worked for at least half a century to bring us our last bucket of water. We have to be equally diligent in looking that far out for our next source. And yet, clearly the era of big water projects has passed its prime and we are facing the particular challenge of living within limits. There are limits on our resources, our finances, our spaces and our ability to solve the problems largely created by our own shortsightedness.

The term "sustainability" is much bandied about, but is ill-defined. There are, however, several concrete things that can be done, and I encourage the region to consider the following suggestions as we set about incurring the financial, social and environmental costs of new water supplies:

- Set a goal and a timeline for achievement of no potable water use outdoors. We can readily decide that outdoor water use in this region will be with reclaimed water, harvested rainwater or the reuse of our graywater. Pouring potable water on the ground makes no sense.
- When sold, existing homes should be retrofitted to 100 percent of new-home standards. The potential for water savings in our existing housing stock and landscapes is beyond huge.

- Fiscally, environmentally, and socially (triple bottom line) analyze our additional conservation efforts and weigh them against engineered or acquisition solutions.

Write to Val Little at vlittle@u.arizona.edu

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