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Supervisors OK participation in city-county water study

First phase will assess demand, infrastructure

By Erica Meltzer

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Pima County Board of Supervisors gave the go-ahead Tuesday to a joint city-county water study.

The study could be the first step toward more cooperation between Tucson Water and the Pima County Regional Wastewater Reclamation Department.

Supervisor Ray Carroll voted no after the other supervisors didn't support his proposal to delay the vote for 60 days to allow for more public discussion.

He proposed holding a series of forums or tutorials on water issues at night and on weekends to educate the community about water issues and allow for discussion before the supervisors voted on the scope of work.

He also said there needs to be more involvement from outlying jurisdictions and small water companies.

"We will not build any trust or buy-in without inclusion of the smaller jurisdictions and the water utilities," he said. "There's a saying: If you're not at the table, you're on the menu."

But the other supervisors said there will be plenty of time for public involvement before policy decisions are made. They directed that the committee overseeing the study come up with a plan for public involvement starting at the second phase of the study within the next 60 days.

That committee will include members of the city's Citizens Water Advisory Committee, the county's Wastewater Advisory Committee and both jurisdictions' planning and zoning commissions. Their meetings will be open to the public.

Two concerned residents asked the county supervisors to move more slowly.

"I voted no on Prop. 200 because city and county leaders promised a public dialogue on water," said Debbie Collazo, referring to the voter initiative that would have restricted water hook-ups and the use of reclaimed water. "I'm still waiting for that. Please don't relegate the dialogue about these important issues to little-publicized subcommittees."

The first phase of the study will be an inventory of water and wastewater infrastructure and an assessment of future water supplies and demand. It also will include discussion of the location of a reclaimed water facility in the Southeast, construction of a recharge facility for effluent and finalizing an agreement on using effluent for conservation.

The first phase is expected to last until the end of the year.

The second phase will include a discussion of values and policies, including population, land-use planning, appropriate uses for reclaimed water, additional renewable water supplies, drought management and water-conservation standards.

The city and county have called on smaller water utilities to conduct their own inventories and policy discussions.

The third, fourth and fifth phases are less well defined and will expand the discussion to a regional level, with a goal of a "sustainable water future."

The city and county have agreed to commit between \$100,000 and \$150,000 each toward the study.

The other supervisors rejected the idea that they were excluding the public. They said the first stage is really just a compiling, by city and county staffs, of existing information. They said the second phase was an appropriate time to bring in the public, including environmentalists, business interests and community groups, as the board and the City Council try to agree on common policies.

"There will be many public hearings on this topic," Supervisor Richard Elías said. "I think it is important to hear from

everyone, but especially those dissenting voices."

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Exploring all water options a necessity

The Pima County Board of Supervisors should approve a joint study with the city of Tucson on the possible use of recycled wastewater among options for maintaining the region's drinking-water supply.

The study — and we want to stress that this is *only* a study pertaining to the region's long-term future — would help prepare the county for possible water shortfalls and assist in planning.

The Star's Erica Meltzer reported Monday that the Tucson City Council has already approved the study. The Board of Supervisors will vote on it today.

We expect our governments to plan for our future, so let's not panic when governments do their job.

Supporters of last year's failed Proposition 200, which would have, among other things, prohibited "toilet-to-tap" water delivery are shouting a universal "I told you so."

Hold on a minute. No one is going to start piping treated effluent to homes in the foreseeable future.

"There's no proposal on the table. The job of planners is to think long term, and thinking long term means getting more use out of our wastewater," Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said in Monday's Star.

As we said in a Dec. 2 editorial ("Yuck aside, debate needed on toilet-to-tap"): The city and county are being prudent and practical by examining all options that might be available — and that includes use of effluent.

In December, we discussed innovations of Cloudcroft, a Summerhaven-like community near Alamogordo, N.M., which began construction of a processing plant that will purify effluent and blend it with spring water for human consumption. At that time we pointed out that there are really only two impediments to converting effluent to safe drinking water — money and perception, perception being the business of getting over the so-called "yuck" factor.

That yuck-factor packs an emotional wallop. Even though the Tucson region at present has no plans to pump treated effluent through your kitchen spigot, it is nonetheless a worthy discussion.

If the region faces some sort of water crisis in 2020 or 2030, it might be this study that lays the groundwork for dealing with the situation.

Water flowing from our taps is considered safe, but it is not pristine, nor is it an infinite resource. Last week, The Associated Press reported that the nation's drinking-water supply, including that of Tucson, contains myriad pharmaceuticals.

Last month, San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography reported that Lake Mead, which provides water for the Central Arizona Project, could possibly go dry by 2021. The CAP helps replenish Tucson's aquifer.

Tucson and Pima County should not acquiesce to the yuck-factor, but should explore all water options and not discount those that will be technologically possible in the future.

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