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Business leaders demand say in water planning

By Erica Meltzer

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Tucson-area business leaders say they want a seat at the table as the city and the county develop a water study that could be the first step toward regional water planning.

County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry and City Manager Mike Hein have not yet developed a scope for the study, which would go to Tucson City Council or the Pima County Board of Supervisors for approval.

But in a letter sent Thursday to Hein, Huckelberry and city and county elected officials, nine area business leaders said now is the time to include community representatives, and called for the creation of a regional water advisory task force.

"We are sure you understand that this scope of work will shape the future process, guide the discussion, and potentially determine the outcome," the letter says. "We are concerned that without the relevant input from others from the beginning, this study cannot meet the needs of our community or lay the groundwork for acceptance of the study by the various interests in our diverse region."

The letter's signers include Ron Shoopman, president of the Southern Arizona Leadership Council; Jack Camper, president of the Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce; Rick Hodges, CEO of the Tucson Association of Realtors; Ed Taczanowsky, president of the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association; and Chuck Freitas, chairman of the Safe and Sensible Water Committee, a group that worked to overturn a ban on the direct delivery of CAP water in the 1990s.

They join area water providers, who already have objected to a process they say excludes them.

Officials said the scope of work will be adopted at public meetings of the City Council and the Board of Supervisors, and forums that are open to the public, including business interests.

The council discussed elements of the scope of work Tuesday and are set to approve a final scope of work Feb. 20.

"Our meetings are public, subject to open-meetings law and available to entire public," said Councilwoman Karin Uhlich, who along with county Supervisors Richard Elías and Sharon Bronson initiated the latest attempt at regional water cooperation. "It affords anyone the opportunity to listen and share their perspective with their elected officials."

"I don't want to create a culture that says stakeholders have special access to the back room," Elías said. "That's a bad message to send to the public."

An earlier proposal to create a regional water authority to search for new water supplies while leaving existing water providers intact floundered after the City Council balked at potentially giving up Tucson Water's autonomy.

Uhlich, Elías and Bronson decided to start this attempt with a study that lays out water and wastewater infrastructure, available water resources, and current and future demand. The City Council and Board of Supervisors could then determine what common goals they had and how they could work together to achieve them.

Those might include expanded reclaimed water infrastructure and placement of wastewater plants to improve recharge of treated effluent.

They said other jurisdictions and water providers would have a role in the discussions, but it was important

for the city as the area's largest water provider and the county as the wastewater provider and flood-control authority to get on the same page first.

But area business leaders said that was too long to wait.

"There are difficult issues, questions of how do we manage water, what are our priorities?" Shoopman said. "If we leave that to two entities, we fear we will not get the kind of process that will really solve this."

Shoopman said the business community would be willing to contribute money for the regional water study to have their voices and interests heard.

SAHBA government liaison Alex Jácome said SAHBA is concerned because developers and builders were not included in the drafting of a recent county policy that requires information about water use be part of requests for rezonings and other land-use changes. He said the group also is concerned because the City Council controls Tucson Water, even though many Tucson Water customers live outside the city.

Jácome said the process needs to focus on additional water infrastructure, including recharging water where it will benefit the entire basin, rather than restricting growth.

The letter calls for neighborhood groups and environmental interests to be included, but the signers are all from the business community.

"The people that signed the letter, their whole premise is that we need to ensure a sustainable water supply for future residents and for growth," said Carolyn Campbell, executive director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.

"I think the needs of the environment and current residents are who we need to be talking about. And that's a pretty big divide in this community."

• Contact reporter Erica Meltzer at 807-7790 or emeltzer@azstarnet.com.

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