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Carroll: State, feds tie locals' hands on water

By Tim Ellis

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Supervisor Ray Carroll said that he and other county officials are hearing the pleas from people in the Sahuarita and Green Valley areas seeking help with dwindling water supplies.

But there's only so much that the county can do to counter state laws that promote development and federal laws that encourage mining, Carroll said.

"We've got one hand tied behind us by state laws and the other hand tied behind us by federal laws," he said in a brief interview after his Friday talk with about 60 people at a Citizens Water Action Coalition meeting at the Green Valley Library.

Many area residents have complained that the county is not doing enough to solve the area's water problems. The biggest problem is that groundwater is being pumped faster than it's replaced, causing the water table to drop by more than 2 feet per year.

The reaction to Carroll's talk was mixed among the roomful of community leaders, activists and others.

"I've heard it before," said Russ Symes, president of the Green Valley Community Coordinating Council executive board.

"He (Carroll) is trying to give the appearance that the county is responding to our concerns, but I'm not all that reassured," Symes said.

But he was willing to, for now, give the benefit of the doubt to county officials.

"We've got a long way to go," he said. "The community is looking for immediate answers, and we're just not going to get immediate answers. We've got to work with the government agencies. It's going to take some time."

"Admitted it in writing"

Peggy Bonthron, a local water consultant, said Carroll's talk and other discussions she's had with county officials give her reason for optimism.

"I think the county is aware, finally, of the groundwater overdraft in this area," Bonthron said. "They finally have admitted it in writing," most recently in an October memo to the Board of Supervisors.

"But I do not think they're focused enough to help resolve the issue," she said in an interview after the meeting.

"They're just all over the place. Nobody's focused."

Bonthron, a former California water-authority official, told Carroll that the county could start on the path to a solution by building relatively simple and inexpensive structures to capture storm-water runoff.

Two rainwater-catchment basins — near Elephant Head, in the Santa Rita foothills east of Green Valley, and at the Old Canoa Ranch to the south — would increase the amount of water going back into the upper Santa Cruz Basin aquifer, she said.

"These are things that Pima County can do, if we can just get them marching in that direction," Bonthron said.

The ultimate solution, she said, must include conservation measures that would reduce the amount of water pumped by the area's two biggest water users: Freeport-McMoRan's Sierrita Mine and Farmer's Investment Co.'s pecan groves.

Carroll said the county is trying to work with many different industries — especially mining, agriculture, developers and golf-course operators — to find ways to conserve water.

The county's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan requires many measures to safeguard water, open space and other environmental concerns, he said.

"The county is responsible for doing something about the problem," Carroll said. "We are. We are trying to be a traffic cop for so many competing interests."

Mining and groundwater

Carroll said he's deeply concerned about mining's effect on groundwater, especially the prospect of another mine pumping water from the Santa Cruz Basin. That's the Rosemont Mine, an open-pit copper mine that Canada-based Augusta Resource Corp. wants to develop on the eastern slopes of the Santa Rita Mountains.

"I do feel that mining is incompatible with our Sonoran Desert, just as is high-density housing," he said. Included are two big developments proposed for areas south of Green Valley: 2,600-home Las Mesas, near Tubac, and 6,800-home Sopori Ranch, near Amado.

Those developments, especially Sopori Ranch, would further strain the area's aquifer because they're higher in elevation and could divert groundwater that flows from south to north, as does runoff in the Santa Cruz riverbed.

That's why organizations with a regional sweep are needed to work on the problem, Carroll said, citing the example of the recently formed Upper Santa Cruz Providers and Users Group.

The group, formed late last year, includes representatives of six area water companies, along with large agricultural and mining firms, golf courses, developers and municipalities.

But leaders of another recently launched regional water-management effort are wrong to exclude representatives of the Sahuarita and Green Valley areas, Carroll said.

The effort, spearheaded by Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry and Tucson City Manager Mike Hein, should include all jurisdictions and organizations that have a stake in water issues, he said.

"I think they're making a crucial mistake," Carroll said. "I think it should be done like the Sonoran Desert Conservation plan. It had buy-in from the beginning.

"I think you should have a seat at the table as well," he said. "If you don't have a seat at the table, you usually end up on the menu."

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