

Arizona Daily Star®

www.dailystar.com[™] @www.azstarnet.com[™]

Published: 03.09.2008

Growth survey: Water a key issue

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A slight majority of Southern Arizonans who responded to an online survey trust that wastewater can be made safe to drink — although many still don't want to drink it.

Nearly three-quarters are willing to impose strict rules limiting outdoor water use, leading a top county official to say those rules still might not be politically feasible.

Eighty-two percent say urban sprawl is a problem, but more than half don't want to live in a redeveloped Downtown Tucson or in condos or other high-density developments. And more than a third say they also don't want to live far from their jobs and have a long commute.

The unscientific online poll was conducted by the Arizona Daily Star. More than 3,300 people responded to more than 70 questions dealing with growth, water, traffic and other urban issues affecting Tucson and Southern Arizona.

Water supply shone through as easily the most important issue facing Southern Arizona. Twenty-seven percent of respondents ranked it first of 18 issues listed. Illegal immigration came in second with 19 percent and growth with 17 percent.

The survey responses also showed that people who put water and growth atop their priority lists were more likely than typical respondents to favor strict rules and measures to control or limit growth and water use.

Northeast Side resident Patty Burks, who took part in the survey, said she and her husband have been thinking and worrying about water since they moved here from Dallas nine years ago.

Right after arriving here, the couple began reading excerpts from "Cadillac Desert," a late-1980s book blasting dams and other water projects as environmentally destructive boondoggles. About three years ago, the Burks had to sink their private well 25 feet deeper because their water pressure was dropping.

Not long afterward, their city water bill jumped from \$25 to \$250 a month for one month after they put in soaker hoses all over their eight-acre plot because Patty grew tired of watching her palo verde trees and prickly pear cacti come close to dying from the drought.

"The groundwater is falling, we are importing water from the Colorado River, you look at Nevada and you see lakes and fountains, and they get water from the same place we are," said Patty Burks, 58, a retired nurse whose husband is an electrical engineer at Raytheon Missile Systems. "We just don't have enough. I think it will last 15 years, but not 25 to 50 years, not at the rate we are developing now."

Homebuilder David "Dutch" Swaim, 66, who specializes in building "green," energy-efficient homes, disagreed in the survey with Burks on whether growth needs to be limited to save water and on whether future growth should be steered toward existing developed areas. Those are proposals that Burks supports and he opposes.

But Swaim, who has lived here 60 years, said that in the future, the controlling factor for growth will be the region's water supplies.

"Anybody that has got half a brain and looks at the handwriting on the wall can see we are going to have a problem," Swaim said last week. "If you don't have drinking water, we can't build houses.

"We've got to look at a lot of different ways to ensure our water supply. The whole western side of the country is in a drought."

The two agreed with the 51 percent of poll respondents that wastewater can be treated so it is safe to drink.

RELATED LINKS

Readers love our region, but growth is a concern

Growth survey: Water a key issue

A closer look at the questions

What you think

Check out the results

But in a separate question, those who don't want to drink wastewater outnumber those who do by 41-39 percent.

Burks, a nurse for 14 years, said she has seen the contents of stomachs more than once and says they will kill almost anything that we put in them, including bacteria from treated wastewater.

"Our world is full of bacteria and the food we eat is full of bacteria naturally," said Burks. "But when we eat food, the stomach handles that. It's very rare, you have to have a strong microorganism to get past the stomach."

Burks and fellow East Sider Paul Sevic agreed with 73 percent of respondents that outdoor watering should be restricted to conserve water.

Nineteen percent of respondents said no, while 8 percent said they don't know.

"It would decrease the flow, stop the waste," said Sevic, who said he regularly sees water running down the street from lawns and other areas with irrigation systems: "They don't keep track of what's going on."

But Northwest Side resident David Lucas said he would prefer raising rates to save water to putting restrictions on outdoor use.

"To arbitrarily say you can't have a pool, can't have plants and can't water plants, that's kind of un-American," said Lucas, who moved to Tucson seven years ago after retiring from the Air Force.

A while back, Pima County tried to ban outdoor misters in restaurants as part of a water-conservation program but had to back off after the restaurant industry responded that it would be too Draconian, said County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry.

But if things get more desperate, tighter conservation measures such as that one would be a viable way of extending the supply, he said.

The administrator also took note of the majority of survey respondents who said that the region doesn't have the water to support growth for 15 years. While Huckelberry believes that's wrong, the survey response shows that officials haven't done a good job of explaining water demands from new growth and how that relates to long-term supplies, he said.

"What you hear when you talk about conservation is that if we do that, more people will come in and take our water supply," Huckelberry said. "They say, 'Why should I conserve and allow more people to move here?'"

On issues of living in the urban core versus the outer fringes of a metro area, by a 75-17 percent margin people thought it is better to steer growth to developed areas rather than letting growth into undeveloped areas.

But most still wouldn't want to live Downtown or in high-density neighborhoods.

Burks said there are a lot of downtowns where she would live, such as Scottsdale, but she finds Tucson's Downtown ambience frightening.

"I don't know what it is. There's something down there I just don't like. I like neighborhoods with adobe houses that they are painting and refurbishing, but Downtown Tucson is just too sterile," she said.

Survey respondent Annita Harlan, a botanist who teaches part time at the University of Arizona, said she would like to see population decreased because she believes that growth has destroyed what she most values about Tucson: the desert, clean air and clean water.

But she said wouldn't move Downtown because she thinks the smog is worse there than at her Northeast Side home.

"I like to live in the natural world and I need to have it around me," Harlan said. "I do not love cities."

Huckelberry and Barbara Becker, who heads UA's planning program, took heart in some of those results. Huckelberry said the 34 percent willing to live Downtown is probably more than it used to be, while Becker said that percentage is important when so much of the Rio Nuevo Downtown revitalization plan's projects aren't priced at levels affordable to local buyers, in her opinion.

"The tragedy is that developers and others involved in redevelopment Downtown have ignored the local market, the pricing is not geared to the local labor force and yet they clearly have a viable market," Becker said.

• Contact reporter Tony Davis at 806-7746 or tdavis@azstarnet.com.

RELATED LINKS

Readers love our region, but growth is a concern

<http://www.azstarnet.com/sn/printDS/228823>

3/10/2008

Growth survey: Water a key issue

A closer look at the questions

What you think

Check out the results

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.