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Inclusiveness, data essential to water policy

Our view: Infrastructure inventory is a first step toward regional water decisions that must include all jurisdictions, groups.

The decisions Southern Arizonans make today about how to manage water will resonate for decades. It is incumbent on our leaders that they come together and look at water as a regional problem that needs a regional solution.

There are signs this may be starting to happen. The Tucson City Council and the Pima County Board of Supervisors have instructed their respective top administrators, City Manager Mike Hein and County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, to draw up a plan for a comprehensive water study.

The supervisors have signed on to the idea and the City Council is scheduled to discuss final details at its Feb. 20 meeting.

As we've noted before, deciding how to extract, use, recharge and recycle water is one of our community's the paramount problems. It can no longer be answered by individual jurisdictions, individual water companies or individual interest groups. Water requires a collective solution.

The question is not whether to but, how do we start the process?

Hein and Huckelberry are working on two sides of the same coin — Tucson is looking at the supply and delivery, as Tucson Water provides water service to about 70 percent of the metro region. Pima County is looking at wastewater because it runs the sewer system that serves more than 80 percent of the area.

But this is Tucson. And in Tucson the mere mention of changing water policy puts our community on high alert.

The Southern Arizona Leadership Council last week sent a letter to Hein, Huckelberry, county supervisors and the City Council asking that they "establish a regional water advisory task force comprised of a diverse group of talented representatives, and that they be brought into the process as quickly as humanly possible."

The letter was signed by nine Southern Arizona Leadership Council and business leaders. They said they're worried that Hein and Huckelberry are designing the water study in a vacuum.

"What we were arguing in the letter is that everybody who has a point of view, who is deeply concerned about these issues needs to be at the table from the beginning," said Jim Kiser, vice president of the leadership council and former Star editorial columnist. "There are a lot of values we have to deal with as a community and you can't have a handful of people, no matter who they are, who go off into a room and make decisions."

Hein said the fears of exclusion are unfounded. The city has citizen water advisory groups, subcommittees and other methods for people to get involved.

"There's never been a time when anyone who signed that letter didn't have an opportunity to write a letter, express an interest, go to a meeting," Hein said. "Some of those people have been led to believe that Chuck and I are designing a strategy or system for regional governance. That's impossible without years and years of public input."

Hein sees the planned study in phases. The first phase, which he'll present to the City Council next Wednesday, consists of cataloging pipes and infrastructure, determining available and future water resources and determining "how many people can we supply?" now and "how many people do we need to supply?" in the future.

"We need a common baseline so we can stop arguing about how much water there is for how many people,"

Hein said.

Phase 2 will involve asking other jurisdictions — Marana, Oro Valley and private water companies — to do the same and begin a regional process. But those entities must be willing to get involved.

Water in Southern Arizona requires a regional approach. Both sides make valid points: the city and county must make an honest, accurate assessment of their water and wastewater systems. And the public must be involved with hashing out our community values about how and where water should be used.

Good decisions require knowledge of the problem, and that's the first phase of the study. Good decisions also require many voices and innovation, and that's what we look forward to as this new, broader approach to water policy unfolds.

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