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Regional water planning must include all parties

Opinion by Ron Shoopman, Jack Camper and Ramon Gaanderse

If Tucson is to have a future that is truly sustainable, then we need to think, plan and act regionally. Nowhere is this truer than with water.

That is why nine business leaders sent a letter two weeks ago to the Tucson City Council and the Pima County Board of Supervisors in which we expressed concerns over the current water study being developed by the city and county. That effort has been characterized as a regional study and plan, but the city and the county are the only people charting the course.

Consequently, we and other business representatives have tried to learn more about the study in recent weeks by meeting with several council members and supervisors as well as the city manager and county administrator. In those meetings, we have insisted that the city and county open up their process to other participants, but they consistently have declined to do so.

In our meetings and in the letter last week, we stressed that all interested parties must be at the table together. These interested parties include the region's water providers, environmentalists, neighborhoods, water experts, the business community and average citizens. We have been reaching out especially to the environmental community, asking that its representatives join us in working toward a regional plan.

City Manager Mike Hein is now talking publicly about a two-phase approach, with the first phase involving only the city and the county as together they catalog infrastructure and analyze projections of population and water supply. Only a later phase would involve other jurisdictions and water providers. This falls far short of an overall regional plan for water.

As a regional community we face many decisions that will test and clarify our values. How should we allocate our water resources in terms of existing and future population, open land conservation, the environment, recreation, region-wide prosperity and other considerations? What is the best model for managing these resources?

These are not technical questions that can be answered by technical experts or bureaucrats. The city of Tucson cannot answer these questions for the region. Neither can the county, the other towns, environmentalists, neighborhoods or the business community. These are broad questions of public policy that can be answered only if everybody has an equal seat at an open table. They are questions we need to discuss and answer now.

As we expressed in the letter, we are concerned that without relevant input from others, from the beginning, the city and county's work cannot meet the needs of our community or lay the groundwork for acceptance of the results by the various interests in our diverse region.

We invite you to join us in insisting on an open, inclusive and regional planning process for our region's water. Our future requires it.

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