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Some ideas on water

Forum participants say community needs long-term planning that is tied to land use, transportation and other regional issues

Opinion by Sharon B. Megdal

Water issues have often divided this community, but our core views may be more similar than we thought. That is one of the conclusions I draw from sifting through almost 350 comments from the Community Conversation on Water held in late October.

The one-day program was designed first to inform and then to generate dialogue among the approximately 300 participants, not to develop solutions. We invited additional feedback through the distribution of a questionnaire at the forum as well as electronically.

The questions asked about:

- The most pressing water issues for the region;
- The issues about which participants wanted more information;
- Desired outcomes;
- Input on how the region should move forward; and
- Messages for regional leaders and decision makers.

The questionnaire was not a scientific survey, but the participants at the community conversation were quite diverse. Although the event did not specifically address Proposition 200, the heightened attention to water issues brought about by the proposition that voters rejected in November helped bring together a rare mix of local politicians, business leaders, water professionals, activists and concerned citizens. And they seemed eager to share their thoughts.

As I reviewed the questionnaire responses and reflected on the event, some important themes emerged.

There was a clear call for what I will call meaningful, long-term, regional water planning. The need to connect water resources with land-use decisions and transportation planning was noted many times, as was the importance of connecting energy use and water resources. People want to see more explanation of options and their associated costs. They want plans for infrastructure and water resources, but they also want to see how the associated costs will be distributed. People do seem willing to pay more for water when there is justification.

Respondents want plans to reflect community values and they want to be involved. Many spoke in terms of desired quality of life. Articulation of values and visions for quality of life will require significant additional dialogue. Many commented on the need for more communication, public involvement, education and outreach. They noted the importance of involving our youth and the schools. Some suggested the formation of a broad-based community advisory board or coalition. Many advocated for more regular and more participatory discussions.

Climate change was a recurrent theme, and several respondents thought that it is a defining issue for us going forward. Better understanding of the implications of climate change for our region's water resources is essential. For instance, to what extent can this region depend on water delivered through the Central Arizona Project? Answering this serious question, which is on the minds of many, requires credible projections that address a wide range of possible outcomes.

Join discussion

All responses, along with other postings from the Oct. 26 Community Conversation on Water, can be found at the Water Resources Research Center's Web site:

www.cals.arizona.edu/azwater You can also extend the conversation by sharing your own responses to the questions.

Many commented on the need to recognize and incorporate environmental values in our planning. There is also a desire to better understand the role of water conservation.

Calls for leadership, honesty and transparency likely reflect the desire to get beyond buzzwords, as one person noted, and focus on the facts. The attendees want the dialogue to be anchored in science and economics, not glib reassurances. Many want our community to be sustainable, but what does sustainability mean? That is something we as a community need to define.

People want action, but there is recognition that the solutions will require compromise. Solutions are unlikely to come easily or quickly. The public and private sectors must be involved. Some noted a continued role for the private sector in supporting education and dialogue on these matters.

Divergence was reflected in views expressed on whether the community will change its approach to growth. Comments reflected both optimism and pessimism. Will there be collaboration across jurisdictions and across different constituencies? Will there be regional leadership? Or will it be business as usual, which will undoubtedly continue the frustration and divisiveness that led some to embrace Proposition 200?

It is not yet clear whether the current focus on water issues will be sustained and lead to consensus. There are many different ideas being tossed about. There is no simple "magic bullet" solution. But the questionnaire responses make one thing rather clear — conversation matters. The intermingling of experts and non-experts resonated with many in a way that should encourage us all.

My primary takeaway from the event and the feedback is that our community must start down the path of developing solutions. In order to be productive, we must be inclusive. It will take us some time just to figure out how to go about meaningful, long-term regional planning.

We must begin without predetermined outcomes — other than to emerge with a better approach to long-term water-resource management. It is essential that we willingly invest our time, resources and ideas. We must continue the conversation.

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