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Town wants role in water efforts

> Councilman Sullivan: 'We have to be at the table' <

By Tim Ellis

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Sahuarita officials say the town must have a role in a new regional effort to find a way to provide water for the town — and the million other people who live in the Tucson area.

Two members of the Town Council have added their voices to a growing chorus of Tucson-area leaders who are demanding to participate now in a regional effort already begun in recent weeks by Tucson and Pima County officials.

"This is a key issue, water, and it affects everybody," said Councilman John Sullivan. "So, we have to be at the table."

Among other things, the regional plan should take into account the town's plans to annex lands to the east and west of town, Sullivan said.

Mayor Lynne Skelton also wants Sahuarita to be involved, because it faces the same problem as Tucson and other outlying communities: finding a sustainable source of water to support a growing population.

The town's growth, along with decades of heavy groundwater pumping for mining and agriculture, is causing the water table beneath Sahuarita and Green Valley to fall by at least 2 feet annually, studies show.

Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said no jurisdiction is being excluded from the regional effort he and Tucson City Manager Mike Hein have begun.

The city and county are the only jurisdictions involved at this point, Huckelberry said, because they both need first to conduct inventories to get up-to-date information on the city-administered water-delivery system and county-operated wastewater-treatment system.

"We encourage everybody to do a phase 1 study," he said in an interview last week. "When all municipalities have done that, I'm sure everybody will be invited to the party."

Sullivan said he's concerned that if Sahuarita and other municipalities and organizations aren't involved from the beginning, the city and county will have too much influence on the process.

"The two big players can't just work out a plan and impose it on everybody else," he said in an interview last week.

"They're saying we'll do the first part, and then we'll get others involved, he said.

"We need to be at the table," Sullivan said. "I don't think you can have a regional planning authority and ignore Sahuarita, Marana, Oro Valley, the businesspeople."

By the numbers

2-3 feet

The rate at which the ground-water level below Sahuarita and Green Valley is dropping, because water is being pumped out of the aquifer faster than it is being replenished.

3,200

Sahuarita's population in 2000

22,000

Sahuarita's present estimated population

1 million

Tucson metro area's population

70 percent

The portion of the metro-area population served by Tucson Water

88 percent

The portion of the metro-area population served by Pima County's sewer/waste-water system

He referred to concerns by Tucson-area business leaders outlined in a Feb. 7 letter sent to Hein and Huckelberry.

"We are concerned that without the relevant input from others from the beginning, this study cannot meet the needs of our community or lay the groundwork for acceptance of the study by the various interests in our diverse region," the letter states. It was signed by leaders of the Southern Arizona Leadership Council, Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, Tucson Association of Realtors and Southern Arizona Home Builders Association, among others.

Sullivan agrees.

"They've got to stop treating us like children," he said. "The RTA didn't pass because Tucson and Pima County came up with a plan and imposed it on the rest of us," Sullivan said. He referred to the Regional Transportation Authority, which voters approved forming, along with a 20-year transportation-improvement plan, in May 2006.

He said he had been pointing out the need for Sahuarita to be involved in the regional effort for more than a month before he again raised the issue during the Feb. 11 council meeting.

Council members directed Town Manager Jim Stahle to contact city and county officials, explain the town's position and urge them to invite Sahuarita to participate.

Council members have been studying the issue and inviting water-issues experts to council meetings and retreats to explain the problem and suggest solutions, Sullivan said.

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