

Tucson Citizen

Our Opinion: Cooperation on water: first steps in long journey

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City and county elected officials are moving closer to cooperation on water, although it remains unclear how far such cooperation ultimately could go.

The Pima County Board of Supervisors last week voted to approve formation of a joint city-county plan for an advisory committee that would formulate policies on future water demand and use.

The City Council already is on board with the idea.

But what exactly does this mean?

The first responsibility of the committee is an assessment of existing information on water resources, including treated wastewater. Then there will be talk about regional policies on conservation and water supplies.

That establishes a needed baseline. But then what?

This has been compared with the Regional Transportation Authority in which all jurisdictions in the county worked to draw up a plan. Voters approved it, along with a half-cent sales tax to pay for it, in 2006.

But the RTA was drawn on a blank slate. Water is far more complicated.

Tucson Water, a city department, provides water to a large part of the metro area. The county handles sewer services for the region. Neither government is willing to give up systems they have paid to build - and that makes sense.

Complicating it further are cities such as Marana that weren't around when the water/sewer agreements were drawn up. Marana wants a seat at the table and wants access to its own assured water supply.

Making regional cooperation more difficult is the loss of David Modeer, the highly respected director of Tucson Water for almost 10 years. He is leaving to head the water department in Phoenix.

When Modeer came here, Tucson Water was in a mess because it had botched delivery of Central Arizona Project water. Modeer fixed that, and the utility regained public trust.

Modeer didn't make many headlines here, and that was one of his biggest successes. He would have been invaluable in working toward regional water cooperation.

Some degree of cooperation is necessary. But with nothing except baby steps taken so far, it is difficult to know where this journey is headed.
