

Tucson Citizen

Water cutoff forces planning

Governments already wrestle with growth

ERIC SAGARA and B. POOLE

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Tucson's decision to halt expansion of its water system is jump starting discussion on regional growth.

The city's move was a step toward ending ongoing water wars and uniting the metropolitan area under regional water and land-use policies.

City Manager Mike Hein revealed at Tuesday's City Council meeting that he had ordered a stop to expansion of Tucson Water's delivery system beyond city limits to instead focus on areas where it is legally obligated to deliver water.

The potentially risky move already is bringing other local government officials to the table for what Hein called a pressing need for joint discussions of growth and water.

"It just seems to me that we have to be able to set the table and have some rational dialogues that aren't built on turf, aren't built on egos and aren't built on political control," he said Wednesday. "When I talk about regional growth, we should as a region understand each other's intentions. I find more typically than not (that) all of our goals are aligned. They're just not communicated real well."

Pima County Supervisor Ray Carroll, who represents eastern Pima

County, said it is a good time for the city to examine its policies because new housing starts are in decline.

"There's not going to be a lot of neighborhoods that need an expansion," he said. "The market's already got a moratorium on expansion."

One risk in the city's move is that developers could begin drilling wells themselves, said Sharon Megdal, director of the University of Arizona Water Resources Research Center.

That was a worry that city and county leaders expressed about the potential impact of Proposition 200 before November's election in which the controversial water initiative was soundly defeated.

It would have blocked Tucson Water from making new connections in unincorporated areas.

Under state law, developers must prove they have an assured water supply for new neighborhoods. They can do so by hooking into water companies that have proved they have enough water.

Developers can also create water companies that pump groundwater to serve new neighborhoods, as was done for Rancho Sahuarita, a neighborhood south of Tucson.

Hein and Mayor Bob Walkup said they hope the city water moratorium will promote in-fill development instead of leading to more urban sprawl.

"In-fill is one of the critical parts of this whole regional plan," Walkup said.

"We already have the streets and we got the pipes and we've got the fire stations and the police stations," he said, referring to city infrastructure.

Pima County officials said they like the city's move.

Supervisor Sharon Bronson said she believes it will invigorate regional water planning.

"It's going to engender the debate, and the community needs to have the debate," Bronson said.

She and Carroll said they favor a regional water authority that would ensure that the 34 percent of Tucson Water customers - about 75,000 - outside the city have representation in water issues.

"I get calls all the time from residents in unincorporated Pima County who are angry because they can't vote (on city water issues)," Bronson said.

The supervisors on Tuesday took their own steps linking the discussions about growth and water to the region as a whole. The board passed an amendment to the county's comprehensive plan requiring developers to reveal how they would get water before their development plats are approved.

"Certainly we're going to look more favorably on a neighborhood that has a (water) provider," Supervisor Richard Elías said.

Walkup said that is a strong argument for requiring unincorporated areas to be annexed by the city to get water service.

"There was a period where we said, 'Well, look, if you want city water, you've got to become part of the city,' " the mayor said. "What I'd like to know from the public is, does the public really get the importance of being able to vote on water issues?"

"That kind of came up during Proposition 200 where people were saying 'This is affecting our water, and we're not in the city'," Walkup said.

While the proposition's appearance on the ballot may have prompted the move toward regional planning, Hein and other town and city managers said local governments have taken a more cooperative approach to solving the area's problems for a few years.

Land-use policy is being addressed through the Pima Association of Governments, and area streets, roads and highways are being planned under the Regional Transportation Authority.

Marana Town Manager Mike Reuwsaat said planning officials have discussed the basic framework for regional cooperation through the

association of governments.

He said it may be timely for talks to start at higher levels among the politicians and policymakers.

"I think those discussions are always healthy, so the question is, what is the forum, and quite frankly the beginning of that forum has already started in (within the association)," he said. "From a regional standpoint, it's always productive to have discussions about growth corridors and the resources needed. Water is one of those and transportation is another obvious one."

Marana's actions also were an impetus for what the city of Tucson has done.

Marana is suing Pima County over sewer service and effluent rights in the town, and in recent years has battled Tucson over CAP allotments and ownership of Tucson Water's infrastructure in the town.

Some of those fights occurred while Hein was Marana town manager.

Water may act as a catalyst for further discussion, but it will not be the only factor considered in planning, Hein, Reuwsaat and Oro Valley Town Manager David Andrews said.

Quality of life, employment and the environment will play important roles.

Growth in Phoenix ran rampant for many years and Tucson-area officials want to avoid duplicating that.

"This southern Arizona region has been a lot more environmentally sensitive than some of our neighbors to the north," Andrews said.

"They fit the land to the development whereas we fit the development to the land, and I think that's a distinctive difference. I see that continuing."

Hein said regional cooperation will not be an overnight change in policy and that debate over growth has been "contentious" in the past.

"There's always been discussions about regional planning, but whenever

someone sticks their foot in the water, it usually gets bitten by something or somebody," he said.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

TIMELINE

1992: City begins delivery of Central Arizona Project water, pumped here from the Colorado River via a 336-mile canal. Widespread damage to residential plumbing occurs.

1995: Citizen ballot initiative bans direct delivery of CAP water and calls for recharging water into underground aquifer.

2001: Avra Valley complex begins recharging CAP water into well field west of Tucson Mountains.

2003: After improvements, city begins delivery of a blend of CAP water and well water to Tucson homes.

2004: Water table in city's core is reported to be rising for the first time in 50 years.

2005: Voters approve bonds that allow Tucson Water to expand. City officials aim to increase capacity to allow Tucson to use its full 136,000 acre-foot CAP allocation each year. Full use would protect Tucson if a water shortage is declared on the Colorado River, which seven states draw from. Continuing drought and light snowpack prompt the city move.

2006: Agreement ends 30-year-old lawsuit filed by Tohono O'odham Nation, which claimed mining had sucked up Indian groundwater. Tribe gets rights to 60,000 acre-feet of water per year - 37,000 acre-feet of Central Arizona Project water and 28,000 acre-feet from U.S. Department of Interior. That's enough to support 222,000 southern Arizona families. One acre-foot is about 325,000 gallons.

November 2007: Voters defeat Proposition 200 ballot initiative that would severely restrict new hookups.

December: City Manager Mike Hein orders Tucson Water to halt expansion outside city. Tucson Water provides 74 percent of the water in the metro area. About 34 percent of the department's customers are outside city limits, including Marana and Oro Valley.

Source: Citizen archives