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Statement to Regional Water Study Oversight Committee on 4/18/08

Thank you for this opportunity to address your committee. I would like to start off by recounting how your committee came about, with the hope it will help people better understand the critically important role you have the opportunity to play in our community.

In November, Supervisors Richard Elias and Sharon Bronson, and Councilwoman Karin Uhlich sent a letter asking the city manager and county administrator to put together the scope of work for a comprehensive water study. They called for “a collaborative effort to better plan our area’s water future.”

The leadership council strongly supported the idea of a regional water study, but we immediately began asking questions. Their letter said “our area’s water future.” Were they talking about only the city and county, or were they speaking of the entire Tucson region? What precisely did they mean by “a collaborative effort”? Who did they want involved? Did they intend for the city and county to involve other jurisdictions and water providers in determining “our area’s water future”?

We asked those questions, but the responses were unsatisfactory. Basically, we were told, “trust us.” So on February 7, SALC and several other business organizations sent a letter to the council members and supervisors, asking them to commit to a procedure that would be “open,” “inclusive,” “regional,” and “solution-oriented.” Please note. We were not suggesting any particular outcome. We were – and remain – deeply concerned about the openness and inclusiveness of the process.

A week after we sent our letter, Chuck Huckelberry and Mike Hein released their draft scope for the water study. Overall, we liked it. But we had concerns that in some places, the city and county seemed to be proposing to make decisions on their own that most appropriately should include other jurisdictions and water providers, as well as the general public. So we wrote a second letter to supervisors and council members, expressing our concerns.

In response, the city council a few days later called for the creation of your committee. Then, Chuck Huckelberry sent a memo to the Board of Supervisors, in which he defended the scope of the study. He criticized SALC and the other business groups, saying our concerns were premature and not accurate. And he wondered in writing whether we could “propose a public involvement plan.”

That leads us to your committee's meeting this morning to take input from the public on what a good process should include.

I am speaking today as a vice president of SALC, but I am also speaking on behalf of a growing coalition of business and other organizations that is concerned with the city and county's process. We are not business alone. We are beginning to work with environmental organizations and other water providers who share our concerns for the region's future.

We remain committed to the values we have expressed throughout the past few months. We want a process that has no predetermined outcomes. We want a process that is open, inclusive, regional and solution-oriented, and that provides the most involvement in each decision to those who are most directly affected by the outcome. If you devise a process that incorporates these simple qualities, you will have our total support.

But for you to do so, I believe you are going to have to rethink your role as a committee. I am concerned you need to view your role more broadly than I suspect you do.

Last week at your call to the audience, I praised the revised scope of study overall. But I expressed concerns that several provisions in phases 1 and 2 of the revised scope of study are much too broad for the city and county to work on alone. They affect other jurisdictions and providers, who we believe should also be involved. Afterward, I was told the issues I raised were outside the scope of your work.

I hope you do not agree. That is exactly why your committee was created. It was created to ensure that everybody who needs to be involved is involved.

I would like to encourage you to remember that you – and you alone – can determine what is in the scope of your work. Nobody can stop you from asking whatever questions you want to ask, investigating whatever issues you want to investigate, and making whatever recommendations you believe are right and appropriate. Your committee occupies a very important place in the process of creating the community we all want. You have the wonderful freedom to go where your intellects and your consciences lead you.

I hope you will consider the scope of study and make recommendations for changing it as you think appropriate, especially in bringing more regional involvement to Phase 1 and 2 activities. I hope you will see your role as ensuring that any decision with regional ramifications is made regionally, and that all who are interested have an opportunity to participate in making the decision.

You have the unique opportunity to speak truth to power, and to the community. I urge you to use this opportunity to bring together the entire region in solving our regional water problems.

Thank you.