

Guest Opinion

The Tucson City Council needs to support these recommendations to ensure our area's water future

by [Jim Barry](#), [Chris Brooks](#) and [Bonnie Poulos](#)

This past December, a volunteer citizens' committee, in conjunction with a large, multi-disciplinary array of city and county staff members, wrapped up a 20-month study of the water and wastewater resources of the city and county; the goal was to "develop a common understanding of the basic facts and critical factors related to planning for a sustainable water future."

It was completed in two phases, resulting in two documents—the first, an inventory of water and wastewater resources currently held by the city and county; the second, a set of principles and policies to help us become more sustainable in the management of water.

At a joint meeting of the Pima County Board of Supervisors and the Tucson City Council, on Jan. 12, the supervisors voted 4-1 to adopt the recommendations of the Phase II report. The City Council, however, voted to wait another 30 days because of concerns that they were not given sufficient time to review the report, whether stakeholder input had been sufficient, and about the content of the report.

These concerns were completely unfounded.

The final Phase II report had been available since mid-December, and the report itself was the culmination of 12 public meetings where staff presented technical reports, and the committee drafted its portion of the report. All of those meetings were recorded, with video, audio and written records available to the public. Phases I and II of the study were limited to the jurisdictional areas of Tucson Water and Pima County Wastewater; no other jurisdictions were part of the study, but they were free to provide input at meetings or by submitting written comments, which some did.

This is an important study for the Tucson region because of what it proposes for growth policies. In the past, we have largely reacted to growth as it occurred. As proposed in the Phase II report, proper planning for growth can protect our existing water supplies, limit the need for costly new water supplies and protect the environment.

We are quickly approaching a time in the Southwest when finding sufficient water for new growth is going to get much more difficult. And when water is found, its cost will greatly surpass what we currently pay. On top of this, there is uncertainty about our current water supplies because of factors outside our local control: climate change and increasing demand for water in the Colorado River basin, where most of our water currently comes from. To address this, the report calls for looking further into the use of local, renewable water supplies, i.e., effluent and rainwater, to replace many current uses of potable water, like outdoor irrigation. This allows us to conserve potable water supplies for essential human uses.

We also must allocate water for the environment. Historically, the environment has been viewed more as a supplier of water than a user. But as we have seen nearly all riparian ecosystems in the Tucson basin altered or eliminated by our ever-increasing thirst, the environment has inevitably been sacrificed at the altar of growth. Viewing this as an either-or issue has caused us to miss opportunities to accommodate both the environment and the economy for the overall good of the community. The Phase II report outlines a series of policy changes that can promote allocation of water necessary for the environment without compromising our ability to support continued growth. Our overall quality of life depends on changes like this.

If you believe the city of Tucson should follow through on the recommendations of the Phase II report and pursue more sustainable water policies, please contact the mayor and council prior to Wednesday, Feb. 17, or attend the public hearing at 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, Feb. 9, to encourage the mayor and council to support the recommendations in the Phase II report. Additionally, the council should be encouraged to continue supporting the process they initiated by promoting the creation of a regional body (as called for in the scope for Phase III of the study) to implement a broad, regional stakeholder process that will seek to apply similar principles of sustainable water management throughout our region.

Comments may be submitted to the mayor and council at cms3.tucsonaz.gov/mcc or by going to the water study Web site (where reports can also be downloaded): www.tucsonpimawaterstudy.com.

Jim Barry, Chris Brooks and Bonnie Poulos were members of the citizen's oversight committee on the City/County Water Study.