

Talk of the Town: Critical water issues deserve voter attention

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Gary Beverly. (Courtesy)

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We face a critical election for City of Prescott mayor and council. Prescott's water policy has a fundamental influence on the future character of our area. Do we want tens of thousands of new homes? Do we have enough water?

Citizens have the opportunity to vote for candidates who share their views about our water future. Winning candidates will be instrumental in determining future water policies and the future character of Prescott.

The importance of Prescott's water policies cannot be overstated. In large part, water policy determines the rate of local population growth and our water security, which we hope includes sustainable groundwater for future generations and a flowing upper Verde River. For this reason, citizens must be better informed and have more opportunity to participate in developing, commenting, and approving water policy.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) will provide candidates an opportunity to share their views on vital water issues at CWAG's 17th annual Candidate Forum on Saturday, June 26, at 10 a.m. The forum, held via Zoom, is open to all citizens who preregister at cwagaz.org. Also, the event will be recorded and available for viewing on cwagaz.org.

CWAG is nonpartisan; we do not endorse specific candidates. Our goal is to insert water issues into the political and electoral dialogue by informing voters and candidates about water issues and revealing the candidates' views on these issues. The questions we will ask the candidates at the forum are posted on cwagaz.org.

One key issue is that the will of Prescott voters must be respected. Specifically, the city must follow the provisions of Proposition 400, the Reasonable Growth Initiative. For annexations exceeding 250 acres, the initiative requires public comment, a supermajority council vote to approve, and that all effluent be dedicated to permanent recharge that cannot be reused to support additional development.

This requirement helps reduce the future overdraft of the aquifer. However, during the last two years, Prescott officials have enacted new policies allowing the city to serve water to large subdivisions without annexation, thus evading the provisions of Prop. 400.

Another critical issue is rapid growth - potentially tripling our population. Every new home consumes groundwater. Even under Prescott's latest water conservation codes, at least 25% of water delivered to a home is lost. The city is now committing water for thousands of new homes. Each home will guzzle precious groundwater.

Although the Prescott Active Management Area is draining its aquifer faster than any other area in the state, Arizona water law permits Prescott to pump "paper water" to support all those new homes. This ignores a growing threat to water for future generations and the Verde River.

Even now, wells are going dry along Williamson Valley Road, west of Chino Valley, and in Coyote Springs. The Verde River is currently at an all-time record low flow.

Prescott is acting legally, but is it ethical and wise?

The Arizona Department of Water Resources will not protect our water supply or the Verde; that is up to us. CWAG urges citizens to vote for candidates who will protect our vital groundwater resource and the Verde River.

Gary Beverly is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.

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