

Guest Column: Prop. 400: Comply or evade?

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The City of Prescott is considering a controversial proposal to provide municipal water and sewer to areas outside the city without annexation. The proposal would sidestep the procedures in the Reasonable Growth Initiative (Prop 400). The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) evaluates policy based on the effect on the overdraft and consistency with existing city policies, including Prop 400. CWAG opposes policies that accelerate the depletion of the aquifer or weaken compliance with Prop 400.

CWAG's mission is to protect the Verde River and to achieve a sustainable water supply in the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA). To assure a long-term water supply, the PrAMA must transition from overdraft to safe yield. To illustrate the problem, the cumulative overdraft since 1985 now exceeds 300,000 acre-feet (a football field over 57 miles deep!) and it relentlessly grows every year, adding about 18,000 acre-feet in 2016.

Voter-approved in 2005 by a huge margin, Prop 400 explicitly connects growth and water policy. For annexations exceeding 250 acres, it requires that all wastewater be collected and dedicated to permanent recharge so that it cannot be used to support additional development, thus helping to reduce the overdraft. Prop 400 requires transparency in the form of a public comment period prior to annexation and a super-majority council vote to approve. An economic cost/benefit analysis is also required.

The city is proposing to provide water to new developments extending north to Chino Valley, without annexation and without compliance with Prop 400 procedures. The city argues that municipal water service with wastewater recharge will have less impact on our aquifer than development based on wells and septic tanks. CWAG calculates that a home in a high-density development may have half the impact of a rural home on two acres because smaller lots use less water for landscapes. CWAG agrees that municipal services may reduce stress on our aquifer.

However, the proposed policy will open the doors to accelerated development and increased water use on nearly 20,000 acres north of Prescott. Rather than promoting a reduction in the overdraft, the city is choosing to accelerate the rate of aquifer depletion. The proposed policy will increase consumptive water use, swell the overdraft and reduce the base flow of the Verde River.

The city anticipates "increased planning flexibility" but doesn't acknowledge the loss of control over development. The city looks forward to swelling revenue by selling water at a 30% surcharge outside city limits without the need to pay for public safety services. Instead expenses for police and fire protection are shifted to Yavapai County.

A complication: we don't know exactly what the city is considering because it has not released a proposed policy, a justification nor an analysis. The city has replaced public transparency with fact-free op-ed columns. CWAG recommends that the city begin a transparent public process to improve the current proposal.

CWAG insists that the provisions of Proposition 400 be followed, and we strongly oppose any new policy that would bypass or weaken the expressed will of the voters.

I will discuss the proposal to provide water outside city limits at CWAG's Feb. 8 meeting. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is president of CWAG and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.

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