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Talk of the Town: City's effluent is no longer wastewater

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In his April 17 Talk of the Town, Tim Brown, president of the Mile High Men's Golf Club, wrote about the Antelope Hills Golf Course. He covered what he thought were some of the benefits of the course to the public. The Citizens Water Advocacy Group will not address all of the issues pertaining to public ownership of the course, but we would like to comment on the issues related to water.

Mr. Brown wrote: "Antelope Hills disposes of the majority of the city's wastewater effluent by way of its watering requirements. Not clean, fresh water. The stuff no one else can use and has already been paid for once through residents' monthly water bill. For that privilege the city charges Antelope Hills over \$255K per year at potable water rates."

It is true that in the recent past, when water supplies were considered to be abundant or, at least, adequate, effluent (water from treated sewage) was generally considered a waste product. There was little interest in recycling the water for local reuse. Communities typically just wanted to find the least expensive way to dispose of it.

But since 1999, when our area was declared "out of safe yield," we have realized the value of effluent. When we recharge effluent to the aquifer we obtain water credits that allow subdivisions to be built that would otherwise be prohibited, or the city can relinquish its credits and leave the water in the aquifer to reduce our overdraft and help us reach safe yield. Recharging effluent reduces the need to obtain more expensive water for either new subdivisions or safe yield.

Mr. Brown's statement that Antelope Hill's two 18-hole courses are paying potable water rates is far from correct. According to Mark Woodfill, [City of Prescott](#) finance director, "Last fiscal year (FY 11) Antelope Hills Golf Course paid \$221,690.39 for 789.27 acre-feet of effluent." That equates to a cost of \$280 per acre-foot or 86 cents per 1,000 gallons. The potable water rate for the largest nonresidential users is more than \$10 per 1,000 gallons. Thus, the golf courses are being charged less than 9 percent of the potable water rate.

This price may have made sense decades ago, but it now represents a huge subsidy - a subsidy that is likely to discourage greater water conservation measures or even lead to improperly allocating our scarce water resources. Because effluent can replace some potential new water sources, the price of effluent today should be close to the price of obtaining those new water sources. Although we do not oppose the use of effluent for the two golf courses, the quantity of water consumed is significant. The 789 acre-feet is approximately the amount used by 3,150 households. Averaged over a year, the courses use more than 700,000 gallons per day.

It's up to the public and the City of Prescott to decide if the course should be subsidized. However, if a subsidy is judged appropriate, it should take a form other than reduced water rates. Market rates for effluent would help ensure efficient use of water on our golf courses.

Prescott needs to move toward more market-based pricing for all uses of its effluent. The city has not publicly reviewed the price of effluent since before we were declared out of safe yield. In the 2001 General Plan and in the 2005 Water Management Policy, the city promised the pricing structure would be reviewed. But nothing has happened.

Effluent contracts for other large users (such as Prescott Lakes) allow for price increases based on the city's increased costs of treating effluent. The city is undertaking a \$40 million improvement and expansion to our sewage treatment facilities. Yet no increase for users of effluent is on the table. If effluent users don't pay their fair share, the rest of us must pick up the tab through increases on our sewer bills.

During the last decade, the city has conducted detailed reviews of the price of potable water on many occasions, and the price has increased considerably. It's now well past time for the city to conduct a transparent public review of the price of effluent and look at adjustments to existing contracts.

Please submit your comments and questions to info@cwagaz.org.

Retired hydrogeologist Dr. Peter Kroopnick will present "USGS Northern Arizona Groundwater Flow Model - Why Is There Controversy?" at the Saturday, May 12, CWAG meeting. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Howard Mechanic is chairman of the Public Policy Committee of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

- [Talk of the Town: Antelope Hills is a misunderstood Prescott gem](#)

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