

The Daily Courier

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Column: County water group protects, informs

By JOHN ZAMBRANO
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There have been many water groups and committees over the years, government and private and mixtures of the two. The most recognized of these is the Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee (WAC), which advises the Board of Supervisors. The WAC includes members from the incorporated communities, tribes and the county itself. If you follow our water issues, you have probably heard of or read about WAC studies, evaluations and controversies. The latter are not surprising where water is the issue.

Recently the value, and thus the future, of the WAC has been called into question. Some WAC members and government officials don't believe we are getting enough information for the money we are spending. Others seem to think the disagreements are too great and not worth debating.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) leadership attends and contributes to most WAC meetings. We believe the WAC has made important contributions and is worth the annual cost of approximately \$1 per resident. Here is why:

In 1999 the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) declared the Prescott aquifers to be in significant overdraft and, perhaps not so coincidentally, Yavapai County established the WAC. The purpose of the WAC was to foster communication among the upper and middle Verde communities. Communication was deemed essential given the upper Verde communities' intentions of obtaining water by tapping the Big Chino aquifer, which feeds water to the upper and middle Verde River.

Among water groups, the WAC is unique because all communities in the upper and middle watersheds are represented, directly or indirectly, and it is funded to do the needed work. The WAC has been the organization to determine the scientific questions that need to be answered, how best to get those answers, and what those answers mean for our precious water resources.

It is through WAC-funded U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) studies that we understand the sources of groundwater that supply the Verde River. Similarly, we now have the USGS regional groundwater flow model, which is currently being used by some communities for water resources planning. The model's adequacy has been accepted by most communities, but disputed by others; however, even the disputing communities value the model as a foundation for conducting additional studies.

Currently the communities, through the WAC, are reviewing a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation-led Appraisal Study titled the Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resources Management Study (CYHWRMS) to determine how we might meet expected water demands for the year 2050. This WAC-funded study is helping us understand what alternatives we have to our increasing pumping of groundwater and each alternative's approximate cost. A decision on whether to pursue selected alternatives for the next level of study will be made in coming months through WAC-organized forums. Certainly the WAC is needed to complete this important work. (For more on the CYHWRMS, see the May 27, 2014 Daily Courier column: <http://tinyurl.com/kqwfx8d>.)

The WAC is supported by a Technical and Administrative Committee (TAC) composed of appointed community representatives and citizen volunteers. While a major function of the TAC is to select the scientific studies that are needed, the TAC also serves as an educational resource for the WAC membership and in turn, all our public officials. This educational function is essential if the communities hope to make wise water decisions.

The WAC also serves an educational function for the public. WAC and TAC meetings offer an opportunity for citizens to hear about our water issues and to provide input to our community leaders. Likewise, media coverage of WAC meetings is an important vehicle for informing the public about water issues and the opinions of our community officials.

We share a common watershed and the WAC is the forum by which we communicate and understand the thoughts, opinions and concerns of our neighbors. It is a valuable collaborative effort by all the stakeholders and the key mechanism by which we obtain most of the scientific information necessary to make wise decisions about our water future. CWAG believes that it's critical that the WAC continue. The cost is well worth it.

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

CWAG will host a candidate forum on water issues for Legislative District 1 House and Senate candidates on Aug. 2 from 10 a.m. to noon at Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation building, 882 Sunset Avenue (two blocks behind True Value). See www.cwagaz.org for details.

John Zambrano is a CWAG board member and a retired environmental engineer.

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