

The Daily Courier

Friday, July 17, 2015

Column: Candidates should know essential water facts

By LESLIE HOY
Special to the Courier

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With the Prescott City Council election rapidly approaching, I've heard candidates say they are hearing from various "sides" about our water issues. It's anybody's guess as to how many sides are out there, but one thing is certain: two of them are "fact" and "fiction."

Over the next four years, city staff will provide council with information and advice on technical issues, but council members make all final decisions on water policy. To do that competently, they must know some essential facts:

- **Safe yield.** The fact is we continue to withdraw more water from the Little Chino aquifer than we and nature are putting back. Based only on recent groundwater withdrawals, we would need to save or obtain another 10,000 to 15,000 acre-feet per year to achieve safe yield. (One acre-foot equals approximately 325,851 gallons.) Consequences of continued overdraft include more wells going dry, increased pumping and drilling costs, reduced stream flows, and land subsidence.
- **Regional cooperation.** The fact is we have not succeeded in coming together as a region to reach safe yield. Science can provide data about demand and supply to aid in allocating each community's contribution to the problem and the remedy, but unless policymakers can arrive at a common vision for the future, agree on common values to guide decision-making and operate in an atmosphere of trust and shared responsibility, it's hard to see how we will reach safe yield by 2025, or maybe ever.
- **Big Chino pipeline.** In conjunction with Prescott Valley and Salt River Project, Prescott is engaged in research to further determine the impact of pumping from the Big Chino Water Ranch on the upper Verde River. The fact is past studies by the U.S. Geological Survey, paid for by the now-defunct Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee, have already shown that there will be an impact.

Ultimately, the council will need to decide whether mitigation is both workable and affordable, and whether the case for the pipeline should be put to Prescott voters. Even if the voters approved the pipeline, it would only be part of the answer. Demand must be reduced.

- **Pipeline alternatives.** The fact is there are alternatives to be investigated. In June 2014, Prescott council members approved a contract with an independent consultant. His scope of work includes the consideration of potential long-term future water sources as identified in the Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resource Management Study, such as rainwater harvesting and increased effluent recovery. Other alternatives to be explored could include aggressive water conservation, reuse of wastewater treated by advanced technologies, storm water recovery and recharge, and developer-funded offset programs.

Should the consultant recommend further investigation of alternative water sources, it will be up to the council, with staff advice, to decide whether and how much to spend on such investigation.

- Conservation. The fact is conservation is the least expensive way to stretch tight water supplies, particularly when compared to importation projects. Furthermore, conservation has been gaining greater acceptance by the public in recent years.

To date, conservation programs in the Prescott region have been moderately successful, based largely on tiered water rates, some monetary incentives, and voluntary efforts supported by information programs. Although Prescott has the best water conservation program in the Prescott Active Management Area, it has achieved only a fraction of the potential savings.

Currently, there are no effective controls on water use outside the home for either new or existing construction. It will be up to the council to decide whether to institute landscaping codes, especially for new construction.

Candidates for Prescott City Council might be hearing things from various "sides," but they should know these essential facts: we are overdrafting the Little Chino aquifer; we have not been able to agree as a region on a solution; importation from the Big Chino Water Ranch without mitigation will reduce Verde River flow; there are alternatives to importation that have not been thoroughly considered; and conservation will be part of any solution.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) will host a forum/panel discussion on water and related issues for Prescott mayoral and council candidates on Saturday, Aug. 1, from 10 a.m. to noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 882 Sunset in Prescott (two blocks behind True Value). Candidates will be available to chat with the public before and after the forum.

Read the questions CWAG will ask the candidates to discuss at www.cwagaz.org. Please submit your questions and comments to info@cwagaz.org.

Leslie Hoy is CWAG Media Coordinator, a founding member, and has lived in Prescott for 16 years.

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