

# The Daily Courier

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**Talk of the Town**

## **Column: Should state help fix local water issues?**

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Arizona faces challenging water issues as we continue to increase in population, with concurrent increase in water demand. In the Prescott and Verde Valley regions, the Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resources Management Study has calculated the need for a large quantity of water to meet growth demand out to the year 2050, with even more needed to achieve safe yield for our aquifer and to protect the Verde River.

Projects, such as Big Chino or Colorado River pipelines and desalination of ocean water, which have been mentioned as potential sources for those large-quantity needs, would be challenging both to finance and to administer. Although the burden of meeting that demand ultimately rests with the local water providers, we need to consider areas where the state can or should provide assistance.

Importing water from the Big Chino aquifer, while the least expensive of the three options, would not provide all the water that is needed for the Prescott region. Furthermore, independent government studies have shown that groundwater withdrawals from anywhere in the Big Chino Valley would reduce flows in the Verde River. Prescott officials, on a number of occasions, have promised to mitigate the effects of pumping. Therefore, the cost of mitigation, if mitigation is even feasible, must be included and would surely greatly increase the cost of this option.

Importing water from the Colorado River poses significant challenges, not the least of which is very high costs. Although rights to Colorado River water exceed the likely available river flow, the purchase and transfer of the higher priority rights would make the river a reliable source.

The state has begun to mention desalination of ocean water as a long-term option, but for the Prescott region, it would be very expensive and would likely involve transfer of water rights.

If these major projects are at all practicable, we need to explore whether the state can or should help finance them. State-approved regional water districts with taxing authority could be used as a vehicle to design, supervise and pay for rural water projects. A state water infrastructure fund where communities can borrow state tax dollars to cover the costs of these large-scale projects is another option.

A low-interest loan from the federal government is a possibility where a project has a federal interest. Without government funding, private investment capital may fill the void, but what will privatization mean for both the supply and price of something as essential as water?

Whether or not we are able to undertake these major projects, we should consider smaller scale projects, including more significant conservation, rainwater harvesting and greater and more efficient use of effluent. These smaller scale options would not provide all the water our public officials would like, and it remains to be seen whether any captured water and recharged effluent would be directed by our leaders toward population growth or toward protecting our aquifer from further depletion and our surface waters from disappearing.

A second issue for our state representatives concerns impact fees to pay for the infrastructure required by development. Municipalities in Arizona have in large part relied on these Development Impact Fees, described simply as "growth paying for growth." In the Prescott region, these fees are critical for providing adequate water supplies and wastewater treatment.

With the passage of SB 1525 the impact fee equation changed. The statute itself is considered by many to be "chaotic" and imposes costs on local governments that at best make the process financially impractical and in some cases, virtually impossible. According to a report published by the League of Arizona Cities and Towns, SB 1525 "shifted the burden of paying for infrastructure on to existing residents and businesses."

SB 1525 has been described as a response to the abuse of impact fees by some communities. We shouldn't let a few bad actors make it difficult for the rest of us. If we want to adequately fund new water and wastewater infrastructure, we need the legislature to revisit SB 1525 and allow communities to more easily collect needed impact fees.

The issues raised above are not easily resolved, but it is up to us to elect representatives that will begin to tackle them and offer responsible solutions.

See LD 1 candidates discuss these issues at the CWAG Aug. 3 candidate forum:  
<http://cwagaz.org/videos/186-forum>.

Please submit your questions and comments to [info@cwagaz.org](mailto:info@cwagaz.org).

*John Zambrano is a Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) board member and a retired environmental engineer.*

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