

SAWS must pick customers or entire county

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As promised, the new president of the San Antonio Water System on Tuesday formally handed board members a detailed list of recommendations for bringing new sources of water to a thirsty and fast-growing metropolitan area in the decades to come.

The recommendations include eliminating well over \$1 billion in ambitious water projects already in the planning stages – a move that drew cheers from some critics.

Lurking beneath the detailed recommendations, however, is a question SAWS has yet to answer – and yet may be equally important to its future: whether the utility should plan on providing water to communities well beyond San Antonio's city limits, or focus inward on its local customers.

David Chardavoyne, a professional engineer with years of experience running private water companies, was directed by the board when he took over in January to review the utility's many water projects under consideration, and recommend the best ones to pursue.

"One thing we knew for sure was that we had more projects than we could ever possibly handle, and more projects than the ratepayers could ever possibly afford to pay for," said Doug Leonhard, chairman of the board's Water Resources Committee.

Leonhard said he's pleased that Chardavoyne and a five-member task force looked at the projects with an eye toward affordability for ratepayers.

The task force recommended dropping the \$971 million Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project and the \$404 million Simsboro project. The Guadalupe project would have piped 30.8 billion gallons of surface water and groundwater from near the mouth of the Guadalupe to San Antonio each year while the Simsboro project would have piped 17.9 billion gallons of groundwater to San Antonio from Lee, Milam and Bastrop counties.

Bill Jones, who represents the O'Connor Ranches in Victoria, Goliad and Refugio counties, told the board he was pleased to hear the recommendation about the Guadalupe project.

"It's far more efficient to use the water from the aquifer instead of letting it run downhill during a drought," he said after the board briefing.

"If this project were to go away, that means the groundwater component would go away, which is what the residents of the lower basin have to rely upon in a drought."

Jerry Morrissey, conservation chairman of the Alamo Group of the Sierra Club, told the board he thought it was "going in the right direction" with the recommendation to drop the two projects, about which he said the group has had great concerns.

Chardavoyne laid out two planning scenarios: one in which SAWS provides only for its customers and another in which SAWS serves as a wholesale water provider for Bexar County. He recommended that SAWS be a wholesale provider.

Board Chairman James Mayor said the plan would have a "tremendous impact on future generations."

"One of the most critical issues to me is whether we go with Scenario 1 or Scenario 2," Mayor said. "Should we just be an island and just worry about ourselves or should we consider having the water available for the county.

"And, if we select Scenario 2, who's going to pay for it? Our ratepayers can't carry the entire county on their backs, and I suspect in the past we've been doing that."

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