

Officials seek common ground on water needs

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Victoria and San Antonio officials were talking, rather than shooting at each other, when they recently met. And they didn't even need to break out the booze to lubricate the discussion.

So maybe the old saying, "Liquor is for drinking, and water is for fighting," could be updated if the longtime contentious relationship between the two municipalities continues to improve.

Victoria Mayor Will Armstrong and Victoria County Judge Don Pozzi headed up to the Alamo City recently to talk water with San Antonio Mayor Phil Hardberger and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff, along with representatives from the Edwards Aquifer Authority and the municipally owned San Antonio Water System.

"We met with San Antonio, and they voiced their concern about having to have water. We voiced our concern about having to have water in critical times," Armstrong told City Council.

Voices are raised far too easily and loudly, and good faith and motives questioned too quickly, when the issue is water. This simple but precious liquid is the lifeblood of semi-arid South Texas, and every city and every resident in the region is determined to make sure they have enough water when they need it.

The issue involves a complex interplay of history, land, water rights, agriculture, industry, residential needs and economic development.

In times of plentiful water, the rhetoric goes down proportionally with the rise of the Edwards aquifer, which supplies San Antonio and which feeds the springs feeding the Guadalupe River upon which Victoria depends.

"When there is an abundance of water, we don't mind San Antonio taking water from the aquifer," Armstrong said. "But during critical periods, we need protection for those springs."



In times of drought, the ill will shoots upward faster than the aquifer level goes down. The possibility of cooperation and shared sacrifice by everyone in the region goes down, drowned out by cries of "It's our water, and you can't have it."

All the elected officials from the two cities who talked water are experienced public servants.

San Antonio's mayor is a former chief justice of the 4th Court of Appeals who won the city's top job because voters there saw him as seasoned, competent and fair. Bexar County's judge is a former state legislator and former two-term mayor of San Antonio who worked hard, if ultimately unsuccessfully, in the mid-1990s to diversify his city's water supply and reduce its dependence on the Edwards aquifer.

Hardberger and Wolff, along with Victoria's Armstrong and Victoria County's Pozzi, should be able to see both the smaller and larger pictures. They should be able to balance their respective communities' legitimate needs, in both good times and bad, with the equally legitimate needs of the larger region of which the two cities are integral components.

They also should be able to discern between legitimate needs and wasteful wants or mere selfishness. That's a critical ability in the midst of a drought, and it's just as important in planning how the cities in the region will respond to one the next time it happens.

"I think they are certainly interested in what we think down here. They are certainly interested in finding some common ground that we can agree to," Pozzi said of the San Antonio meeting.

The two cities are working together on water legislation that would better address the needs of both in regulating the use of the Edwards aquifer.

"But we're not through. We're still working on the issues," Victoria's mayor said.

They should continue this effort. Sober talking is better than fighting. Especially when the issue is as critical as water.