

Calvin Finch: Water resource changes eyed

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Earlier this summer the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) staff introduced a new Water Resources Plan for the SAWS Board of Trustees and the public to consider.

The plan proposes that SAWS withdraw from the Simsboro (Alcoa) and Guadalupe Blanco River projects. Both are expensive projects with major political and environmental issues. The Lower Colorado River Project is still in the plan, but must be renegotiated to address cost and management issues. A brackish saltwater treatment plant was added to the plan and there will be more reliance on aquifer recharge efforts. The Western Carrizo Project is still in the plan, but is delayed to allow an unbiased examination by an outside group to determine what the best strategy is. A number of other projects are still in consideration including the Mesa (Panhandle), Western pipeline, Edwards recirculation and recharge, and seawater desalination, but there was not enough information available to determine how viable they are. To review the entire plan as proposed by the SAWS Task Force visit www.saws.org.

The proposed plan update will save some money because it replaces expensive projects with less costly sources of water and may reduce the future rate increases, but no one knows for sure until the board acts on Tuesday to authorize or revise the proposal. After that happens, SAWS staff will analyze the costs of the new plan.

The proposed plan, if adopted by the SAWS Board, will seek more water rights from farmers and ranchers who own those rights. A number of those landowners have improved their operations through use of more efficient irrigation technology and cultural practices so that they can maintain the same production with less water. The result is that they have surplus water rights to sell.

The conservation effort contributes to the opportunity to revise the Water Resource Plan because the success experienced in San Antonio means the city needs less water in the future. Since 2000, when the original Water Resources Plan was passed by the SAWS Board of Trustees and City Council, San Antonio has reduced per capita water use by 17 percent. Since 1982, per capita water use dropped nearly 50 percent from a high of 225 gallons/person/day to 121 GPCD in 2004. What this means to total water use is that SAWS has used about the same amount of water per year since 1992 even though we have 300,000 more individuals in the service population.

If you visit the SAWS Web site and review the proposed new Water Resource Plan there is a graph on page 15 showing the reduced per capita water-use trend line. Looking at the line it is easy to see why SAWS staff thinks the service area can expect per capita water use to continue to fall at the same rate. The same conservation education, incentive and regulations that achieved the progress so far are in place. Some of you may say, "Wait a minute, we can not reduce water use indefinitely. There is some point when the progress must level off." You are right. San Antonio water use reductions have been accomplished without detracting from our quality of life and/or reduced our ability to grow.

We cannot reduce water use indefinitely without drastic changes in lifestyle, but the service area can proceed to a per capita water-use level of 116 gallons/persons without serious inconvenience. The key factors in arriving at the 116 GPCD figures are that there are plenty of old water-wasting toilets in our homes and businesses to be replaced. Each one replaced saves at least 11,000 gallons per year, and, even if we increase the rate of replacement to 20,000/year,

there are 10 years worth of high-flow toilets to be replaced. Currently, they are being replaced at 15,000/year. Another major contributor is use of treated reuse water on golf courses, large landscapes and for industrial processes. San Antonio is increasing its use of the "purple pipe" water everyday, but SAWS still has more to distribute. The new Water Conservation Ordinance will also contribute to achieving the 116 GPCD goal. It requires low water use landscapes on new homes built after Jan. 1, 2006, requires cooling towers to be managed to use four cycles of concentration, and calls for condensate water to be plumbed to a central location in newly built large buildings (the water can be used on landscapes or for industrial uses).

These provisions were supported by the new homebuilders, cooling tower users and other industries that will be affected. The net result is that the SAWS staff thinks water use will reach the 116 GPCD levels and reduce pressure on San Antonio to participate in as many expensive water resource projects as originally thought necessary.

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