

## Back to the drawing board on SAWS diversification



[Bruce Davidson](#) - Opinion

San Antonio Water System officials weren't as upset as might be expected when they received the recent bad news about the utility's Colorado River project.

The Lower Colorado River Authority board on Dec. 17 passed a resolution that reduced the amount of surface water available for the project, which would bring water from the Colorado River basin to San Antonio, the Express-News reported.

SAWS has invested about \$40 million in several years worth of studies and preparation.

Even before the LCRA board's surprise move, the project was looking less and less attractive. The amount of water was going down and the cost per acre-foot was going up.

"It was already in critical condition," acknowledged Alex Briseño, the SAWS board chairman. "The latest action by the LCRA damaged the original project dramatically."

Other than a relatively small purchase of Canyon Lake water, SAWS does not have any noteworthy surface water in its diversification plan except for the LCRA project.

A separate project that would have brought Guadalupe River water to the city was abandoned several years ago.

After learning of the LCRA change, SAWS CEO Robert Puente secured an agreement with the river authority to delay some SAWS' payments until the end of March, giving the utility time to reconsider its options.

SAWS can get half of its investment back if it pulls out before 2015.

But Puente said he views the situation as an opportunity.

The SAWS chief wants to either renegotiate the LCRA contract or find ways to ensure that San Antonio gets the amount of water it originally wanted.

Other water sources could be incorporated in the plan to pipe LCRA water to San Antonio.

SAWS officials say they don't believe that the LCRA board was trying to kill the deal. But the river authority has a new general manager and a far different board than was in place when the original deal was made.

SAWS staffers likely will tell their board next month or possibly in March whether they believe the LCRA project should be continued or abandoned. Odds are that they will recommend continuing for now.

Meanwhile, Puente is nearing the end of a review of SAWS' water supply plan. He expects to present his proposals in March or April.

Puente's recommendations will be crucial.

As hard as San Antonio has pushed to diversify and reduce dependence on the Edwards Aquifer, the city has a long, long way to go. Almost every supply project SAWS has tried encountered a hostile reception in some quarters.

And time is getting short. Regional water stakeholders are meeting to craft a plan for protecting aquifer-reliant endangered species in the event of a serious drought.

That plan may call for drastic pumping limits during critical management periods.

Despite the daunting circumstances, Briseño and Puente seem energized by the looming challenges. That's good. SAWS has a lot of ground to cover.

The days of water plans that are more about perception than reality are over.

Window dressing will not do any longer.

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