

# The Texas Tribune

## Guest Column: The 2010 Agenda: Water

by Andrew Sansom  
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The unexpected announcement by Kip Averitt, R-Waco, that he will be leaving the Texas Senate has not only left a key leadership vacancy at the helm of the powerful Natural Resources Committee — it's thrown the funding of the Texas Water Plan into question. The price tag for meeting the water demands of Texas over the next half century is expected to be \$31 billion, and Averitt had been gearing up for a major push in the next legislative session to secure the money, or at least to start the pipeline flowing.

According to the current edition of the plan, which is produced by the Texas Water Development Board every five years, the state's population is expected to double between now and 2060, from around 21 million to 46 million. Because of that growth, our water needs will increase by 27 percent. Already in Texas, we've granted permission for more water to be withdrawn from many of our rivers than is actually in them, and we've not managed to create a workable system for managing groundwater which now provides the majority of our supplies.

Against this backdrop and in the wake of Averitt's departure, the water picture might at first seem grim, but a fresh look at the issue is exactly what's needed. The \$31 billion is slated to fund 4,500 projects that will to generate an additional 9 million acre feet of water per year to meet the growing demand. In the main, these are the kinds of projects you'd expect: new reservoirs, water distribution and transmission infrastructure, wastewater treatment and flood control. Yet while the shopping list clearly includes some must-haves, and while the plan gives some support to conservation and lip service to "environmental needs," it can be generally described as more of the same.

The reality is that no matter how many new dams and other water supply projects we build in Texas, the essential components of our hydrologic system are our watersheds and recharge zones. If we lose their vital functions, we won't be able to build enough water infrastructure to meet our goals. Because Texas is almost entirely privately owned, these critical ecological services occur on private property and are thus subject to being permanently impaired by relentless fragmentation and adverse development taking place across the state. Ironically, rural landowners in Texas are generally doing a better job of protecting our watersheds, but the pressures of property and inheritance taxes and encroaching urban development, among other factors, are pushing them off the land faster here than anywhere else.

Though the legislature has been loathe to grant counties the authority to preserve critical watersheds in rapidly urbanizing areas such as the Texas Hill Country, local governments have stepped up to provide millions of dollars of bond funding to purchase landowners' development rights, enabling them to remain on the property and pass it along to their heirs but at the same time protect its essential water supply function in perpetuity.

The push for funding for the Texas Water Plan provides the state with the opportunity to do the same. Recent experience has emphatically demonstrated that more and more landowners in Texas are embracing the concept of selling or donating their development rights through “conservation easements,” thus preserving the habitat and ecological services on family lands for future generations of Texans — including the millions who will be demanding more and more water in the future. Any significant effort to sink billions of dollars into new water projects must include funding to protect the important lands where the first raindrops fall.

*Andrew Sansom, the executive director of the River Systems Institute at Texas State University in San Marcos, was formerly executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.*

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