



Pima and the Politics of Water

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The adage “local policies reflect local values” is certainly true in Tucson, where front lawns are rare, xeriscape is common and water conservation has long been an intense public concern. In truth, of course, every community within the Sun Corridor is distinct, with different histories, cultures and local challenges. Yet our destinies are inextricably, and increasingly, linked. This is why it’s crucial for all of us to develop an understanding of each others’ resources and needs.

It’s equally crucial that we understand local political and economic landscapes. Water management, especially in semi-arid regions, can be a complex and high-stakes affair.

Lines of ownership, authority and jurisdiction are often scrambled. Tucson Water, for example, serves about 80% of the municipal water demands, but more than one-third of its customers reside outside the city limits. These residents do not elect the Mayor and Council, who set the water rates, nor vote on water bonds or initiatives that would change the City Charter. Several other public and private water providers exist in the region. Pima County provides wastewater treatment for most of the region, but the City owns a large portion of the treated wastewater in an arrangement unique in Arizona. Finally, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior controls 28,200 acre feet of the region’s effluent, which it manages for the benefit of the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Against this complex backdrop, the arrival of CAP water in Tucson made the early 1990s a turbulent time. Tucson Water had planned to be the regional provider of CAP water, but this was derailed by the formation of several new smaller utilities by residents outside the Tucson city limits as well as by nearby municipalities of Oro Valley and Marana. Local control of water assets and supply became a focus of citizen activism. The real trouble came when Tucson Water first delivered treated CAP water to its customers. The overnight switch to treated CAP water for over half the utility’s customers was disastrous. Pipes burst, water was brown, and fish died. In 1995, city voters approved a citizen-developed initiative that forced Tucson Water to abandon plans for direct delivery of CAP water after treatment. Instead, a strategy dependent on recharge and recovery has taken hold, and recharge basins have been built to the northwest

and south of Tucson. In other words, the landscape—literally as well as politically—sharply changed.

But all was not conflict. Several efforts to think and plan regionally about water were launched during the 1990s, with mixed outcomes. A legislatively authorized regional water district was not made permanent. The Southern Arizona Water Users Association (SAWUA), an affiliation of water interests, established itself as a regional voice for water providers and large water users. The Water Conservation Alliance of Southern Arizona (Water CASA) formed so that the smaller utilities could collaborate on water conservation programs. The northwest area water providers began to collaborate on efforts to utilize CAP water. The key issue of CAP reliability was resolved in 2010 with a plan based on recharge rather than a surface storage facility. Yet several other CAP issues still remain unresolved, such as a pipeline to bring this renewable water supply to the Sahuarita-Green Valley area.

Effluent remains another unresolved issue. The City of Tucson and Pima County have had their differences regarding how treated wastewater should be reclaimed and reused. They agreed to set aside a pool of effluent for environmental purposes; yet nearly 10 years later the use of the pool appears undetermined. The city and county also worked together for three years to develop water and wastewater recommendations that would benefit the region, including its natural environment. In addition, the multiple owners of effluent have worked collaboratively on effluent recharge in the Lower Santa Cruz River.

The people of Pima County realize how critical water management is for their future and know that they must work together on shaping that future. Citizen awareness of water scarcity is widespread and intense, as is residents’ desire for water policies that balance human and environmental needs. But while Tucson is “different,” this same need for collaboration among water interests, public decision-makers and citizens exists throughout the Sun Corridor. Harmonizing the water policies of the Sun Corridor’s distinct regions will require the time and effort necessary to acknowledge our differences as well as recognize our commonalities. Tucson’s experience is showing that, with patience, persistence and public education, it can be done.