

Water and Annexation: The Dynamic Duo

Whenever the topic of water or annexation is discussed, it is frequently an issue that generates great emotion. This is probably true in most communities, but it is especially true here in Central Yavapai County. As for Prescott, I suspect that the water and annexation debate occurs daily in various coffee shops, bars, on park benches and ultimately, in City Council meetings.

Of course, growth, annexation and the pursuit of a sufficient water supply are not new topics to Prescott and its surrounding communities. Initially, Prescott was a small settlement in a small valley, with water coming from Granite Creek, Miller Creek (and others), along with various small wells. Eventually, Prescott needed additional water to support its growth, so the reservoirs now known as Goldwater Lake and Hassayampa Lake in the Bradshaw Mountains were constructed with their associated waterlines, delivering water down to Prescott.

Ultimately, with the continued growth in Prescott in the mid-nineteen hundreds, the reservoirs in the Bradshaw Mountains proved to be inadequate and insufficient, so the wells in Chino Valley were drilled and developed and the pipelines were constructed, delivering water across the Little Chino to Prescott.

The above, of course, is an extremely short version of the development of Prescott and its pursuit of an adequate water supply. However, it provides the reader with an insight of how long and never-ending the water battle has occurred.

We are now faced with a new challenge as our growth continues and the sufficiency of our water supply is questioned. Fortunately, we now have some tools and information available to us to understand the size and capacity of our aquifer and the rate of withdrawal as it relates to recharge. We also know that as of the mid-nineties, various monitoring wells have indicated a reduction in our aquifer, resulting in the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) declaring that water mining is occurring. This caused the ADWR to form the Prescott Active Management Area (AMA). The sole purpose of the AMA is to ensure, to the best of its ability, the discontinuance of the overdraft of our aquifer and the reaching of 'safe yield'.

So the question is: how do we do that? How do we reach safe yield? Some say that water conservation and a moratorium on growth will achieve the goal. However, the aquifer that makes-up the Prescott AMA runs from Dewey-Humboldt to Paulden and from the foothills of Mingus Mountain to Williamson Valley. Accordingly, Prescott's water usage and growth only affects its proportionate share of the issue of overdraft or water mining.

In fact, since much of the land within the Prescott AMA is outside the limits of the four municipalities (Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley and Dewey-Humboldt) and is indeed in Yavapai County, the water usage in each municipality only affects its proportionate share of total water consumption within the AMA.

Alternatively, water consumption outside the municipal boundaries of the four communities is largely facilitated through private wells that do not receive the same level of control and are not limited by those same regulations. Private property rights, protected by our Constitution, will likely continue to guide the regulation of water usage in Yavapai County and will prohibit significant restrictions.

Accordingly, the only real solution to control growth and its associated water use is through annexation. Annexation is the tool that gives the municipalities the right to ensure that our growth is thought-out and planned. In fact, without annexation, the opportunity for multiple land splits occurs with far reaching impacts on our water quantity and quality, our air quality, our water recharge, our ability to charge (tax) individuals for the services that they receive and the list goes on.

Annexation, once achieved, gives the municipality the power that it needs to regulate housing density and growth, require paved roads to protect our air quality, require proper wastewater facilities to protect our aquifer, require traffic impact studies to protect the traveling public and again, the list goes on.

With our climate, beautiful surroundings, friendly atmosphere, etc., Prescott is always going to be a desirable place to live and we will always experience the pressures of growth. The question is, and always will be, how do we address it. Do we pretend that we can stop growth? Do we pretend that water conservation alone will solve all of our water issues? I don't believe so. Acknowledging that we will grow and acknowledging that we will need to import water to address our current needs, much less our future needs, is ultimately the only answer.

So let's quit blaming our City and Town Councils for doing what is right; they cannot control growth or completely solve our water issues. They are doing what they can and they are doing a pretty good job of it. Let's also acknowledge that a pipeline will ultimately be necessary to bring water in from the Big Chino, but that endeavor has its challenges, both environmentally and financially. To wit, we must find the answers to mitigate any adverse effects to the Upper Verde River and we must formulate a funding mechanism. These will be difficult challenges, but working together versus fighting and blaming is the only solution.

We at the Central Arizona Partnership, a group comprised of civic, business, and education leaders for Yavapai County, care deeply for the community and believe that smart, controlled growth provides opportunities for young families, promotes diversity, helps provide quality health services and establishes a healthy tax base to help pay for an enhanced quality of life. We welcome further discussion on this topic and encourage you to contact us with any questions you may have. www.centralarizonapartnership.org.

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