

A billion-dollar delivery system for water Nevada may never have

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To the editor:

Your Oct. 25 editorial, "Water politics," endorsed the proposed \$1.7 billion Southern Nevada Water Authority treatment and transmission facility. You did a good job of presenting the water authority's side of the water issue. Please allow me, the water consultant for the Nevada Seniors Coalition, to present your readers with another view.

Is it unreasonable to ask where the the water authority will get water for this 600 million gallon per day facility? Pat Mulroy stated in your paper on Oct. 24 that, "We are currently negotiating with Arizona to bank water to store for future use." Arizona gets 46 percent, California 50 percent and Nevada only 4 percent of any surplus water in the lower Colorado River.

Last year the water authority tried to get more water from California by lining irrigation canals in the Imperial Valley. Other California water users quickly put a stop to that pipe dream. How can we ever hope to get the best of California or Arizona when we have two congressional seats, and they have a combined total of 58?

Just how much water is Arizona banking for us? Is there a firm contract for that water, or is it just part of the new "paradigm" that Nevada Colorado River Commission Chairwoman Janet Rogers sees as the solution to Nevada's water problem? I call it the "Field of Streams," or "Build it and the water will come."

Call it what you want, but remember this; Nevada does not have a firm contract for more Colorado River water. Remember, too, that nearly half of our present entitlement comes from wastewaters we return to Lake Mead. For every gallon of wastewater returned, we draw another gallon of drinking water, up to our maximum entitlement of 430 million gallons per day (mgd). We've got a "crap shoot" going on at both ends of the pipe.

There is a water crisis in this valley, all right. The water authority is building a \$1.7 billion facility, paid for by some kind of "spread-the-pain" tax, to pump, treat and deliver water we do not have. "No problem," authority officials say, build it anyway, the water will come. Without the treatment and transmission facility, the water authority says, there will be no water for the 9-foot-diameter south valley lateral pipeline now being constructed along Horizon Ridge in Henderson. What are they going to fill it with, sand?

The water authority says we will soon run out of water on our present entitlement. We have no new water entitlement. Why, then, is it already building another pipeline, doubling the capacity of our present system? We need a separate backup system, the authority says. How many communities in this country can afford a 600 mgd backup, for a 480 mgd existing system, to pump an entitlement of only 430 mgd? Equally troubling, the water

authority plans to build the backup next to the existing system, so in case of a local disaster like a toxic chemical spill, earthquake, or massive flood we lose both and still don't have a backup.

But forget all that for the moment: Let's assume the water authority has "found" another 300 mgd of Colorado River water, or half the capacity of the proposed facility. What are the impacts of bringing all that water into the Las Vegas Valley? More people, more traffic, more smog, more water pollution, more crime, more taxes, more problems. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to figure that out.

"Not so," says the water authority, there will be no significant environmental impacts from the proposed water project, except possibly from wastewater discharges in Lake Mead. Those impacts will be evaluated three years down the road when we need to spend another \$1.2 billion to expand the wastewater treatment facilities.

There have been three spills of raw sewage this year. EPA lets the wastewater dischargers do their own water quality monitoring in the lake, the classic "fox-in-the-henhouse" routine. Does anyone really believe once the treatment and transmission facility is built, or even half built, that the authority will find serious impacts from discharging more wastewater into the lake? If you believe that, I've got some Colorado River water in California I want to sell you.

Pat Mulroy is right about one thing: It indeed is the 11th hour. In a matter of days, Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt will decide if he's going to approve the costly project. Local Interior spokesman Bob Walsh said it will take some problems to delay it. For starters, Mr. Walsh, how about another outbreak of cryptosporidium, a deadly parasite found in animal wastes (yes, human feces too), like the one that killed 32 people including two small children in Las Vegas during 1994?

The Centers for Disease Control concluded, after an exhaustive investigation, that it came from our drinking water. That is not real surprising when you consider the wastewater is discharged back to the lake, just six miles upstream from the existing drinking water intake. So where does the water authority want to put the new intake, or "Second Straw" as they call it? You guessed it, right next to the existing one.

Can you imagine the smog we will have in this valley with twice as many people living here? There are many days when I can't see the Stratosphere from Horizon Drive. If you think water pollution is bad in Las Vegas Bay now, double the wastewater return flows and see what happens.

I point out a bunch of other serious problems with the project in a technical review I did for the Nevada Seniors Coalition. It forwarded my 200 page report to Secretary Babbitt, EPA Administrator Carol Browner and other government officials and asked them

to delay the project until these many problems are addressed. Did your editorial writers bother to read the letters the seniors sent to those officials?

Thus far, the water authority has just ignored project critics, citing the looming water crisis as justification for its cavalier attitude. It stacks its advisory committees with political allies so it's sure to get the "right" advice. I've never been asked to serve on any water advisory committees in this valley. I doubt there is anyone here who has done more applied research on the Colorado River than I have in the past 20 years. The trouble is, I've also got a reputation for doing my homework and asking pesky questions like, "Where's the water coming from for this project?"

I am optimistic that Bruce Babbitt and Carol Browner, both with strong commitments to the environment, will make the water authority re-evaluate this project. Then the water authority needs to get busy and find a secure water source. That "Second Straw" must be moved to a location farther

uplake from the wastewater inflows. Let's get busy restoring the 1,000-plus acres of wetlands in Las Vegas Wash to further cleanse the wastewater returned to the lake. The water authority should complete the 60 million gallon storage reservoir it is building to meet our immediate peak water demands.

The Nevada Seniors Coalition has just given this community an 11th-hour opportunity to correct serious problems with this troubled water project. I admire its wisdom and courage, and think it should be applauded in your editorials rather than labeled as "anti-growth advocates."

LARRY J. PAULSON, Ph.D.
Henderson

■ To the editor:

It seems incomprehensible that the Nevada Seniors Coalition, presumably a responsible group of senior citizens, can object to the construction of a second pipeline from Lake Mead to the Las Vegas Valley. Difficult as it is to comprehend, this group objects to the

second pipeline because we presently don't have clearly defined additional water rights.

Unless we intend to deny all growth, both population and construction, we have to obtain additional water in the out-years. We will get this water from California, Arizona, Alaska, the Columbia River, desalination or from other Western sources. When we get the additional water we will need the facilities to move it into the valley.

I assume some of the Nevada Seniors Coalition can recall the time preceding World War II when Franklin Roosevelt exerted mighty efforts to prepare the country for the war he saw on the horizon. Where would we be today if we had started this preparedness on Dec. 7, 1941? We need to prepare now for the water needs of the Las Vegas Valley. We cannot wait some years hence until we have a clearly identified source of this water.

Build now — the water will follow.

C.J. SMITS
Las Vegas



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