

Subject: Sustainability Forum – Perspectives on Water

Background:

On October 31, 2007, a Sustainability Forum was held at the University of Arizona. Sponsored by the University, the City of Tucson, Pima County, and PAG, the event provided an opportunity for approximately 125 people to participate in a series of discussions to help craft perspectives on the value and meaning of sustainability in the greater Tucson community. Participants met in small groups to consider specific topics including: Water Resources, Urban Green Assets, Landfill Waste Reduction, Reducing Green House Gas Emissions, People Resources, Community Attributes, and Working Together. The Forum was open to the public and while participation reflected a wide range of interests most participants were strongly committed to the need to achieve a more sustainable approach in the community.

This report provides a detailed summary of the discussions that took place in the group that considered the topic of Sustainable Use of Local Water Resources. The group held three distinct discussion sessions allowing a substantial portion of those attending to participate. The group was led by Dr. Sharon Megdal.

Discussion Points:

Key themes that emerged from the discussions suggested that while there is a good level of understanding concerning the importance of water management to the future viability of the region, the sense is that there is a lack of connection between personal values, regional planning, zoning, and institutional priorities. While progress in long-term planning was noted, there remains a disconnect between the perspectives of water managers, scientists, and the public. When it comes to the public's ability to know that water is being properly managed, there is a strong sense of isolation on the part of the public requiring greater outreach and education to overcome.

Pervading the reactions of group members is a very low degree of confidence that water policy is being adequately considered by political and administrative leaders. Driving this perception is the perceived incongruity between living in a desert, amidst a drought and calls for conservation, and unabated growth that logically will create an even greater demand for water. The sense that conservation is being promoted for the sake of facilitating growth is a common concern.

The water discussion group's perspectives are organized into the following categories:

- What is the Best Case possible concerning water in our community?
- What is the Worst?
- What are the paths toward the Best Case?
- What are the constraints and barriers to achieving the Best Case??

Best Case Scenario

Group participants offered a wide array of perspectives. The ideal scenario for managing our water resources would encompass the following attributes:

A sustainable water supply achieving a balance between water removed from the aquifer and that returned.

Landscaping that is in greater harmony with our natural environment and widespread use of water harvesting to use rain water more productively while ensuring adequate water for wildlife and native species.

A community that embraces water conservation and uses water wisely.

The Way Forward

Political will was seen to be a key driver to achieve the sustainable vision. There was strong sentiment concerning water use and growth - the sense is that the two are inextricably linked and that growth should be limited to ensure that sufficient water remains available. Participants felt that community education is needed to ensure that an informed electorate is aware of the importance of water and is sufficiently educated on the topic to allow greater buy-in to a shared vision and informed water management.

With respect to accountability, the participants believed that the identification an appropriate baseline is necessary to determine where we are currently and a clear set of parameters to measure whether a successful water strategy is in place needs to be developed. Key measures such as sustainability and carrying capacity should be defined and various strategies implemented to maintain compliance with an overarching plan for water management.

- The group identified many potential management strategies. Among these were: Implement City of Tucson Water Conservation Task Force recommendations
- Prioritize water use
- Use tax Incentives for assessment and implementation (e.g., incentives for conversion to low flow fixtures)
- Household and public buildings should use gray water, water harvesting and reclaimed water
- Storm water should be retained on site
- Full use of reclaimed water at all golf courses
- More aggressive regulations for rentals, apartments, common areas of water use (using meters for direct feedback) and ensure adequate funding to enforce regulations
- Develop a clear statement of how much water is available for how many people, e.g. carrying capacity
- Aggressive conservation through more appropriate water rates and other mechanisms for commercial, industrial and household
- Use permeable paving to promote groundwater recharge
- Use dry cooling technologies
- Greater use of landscaping with drought resistant plants
- Price water to reflect its value as a resource

- Achieve fully integrated resource planning (e.g., transportation, water, energy, etc.)

Worst Case Scenario

The consequences of a failure to widely manage water resources are seen as dire and provide context to the deep seated fears that group members expressed. Reactions included the ghost town scenario where the economy crashes leading to loss of property values and forced migration and inflicting irreparable damage to aquifers, including increasing groundwater contamination. The increasing reliance on imported water was also seen as a concern that leaves the region at the mercy of outside forces, e.g., extended drought/global warming impacts. Continuing population growth implies that poor water management practices are continuing and making it more difficult to achieve sustainability.

Constraints and Barriers

Various challenges were identified that impede progress to water management. Existing institutions were seen as lacking and not up to the task. Water policy appears to be infused with conflict between private and public perceptions of water, the need for revenue from water sales and the need to conserve, lack of agreement on the appropriateness of the use of imported supply, and conflict between agencies and managers. Public education was again highlighted to increase the awareness level. Ultimately, the lack of public confidence that water is being properly managed is a barrier in and of itself. Lack of trust can be exemplified in the commonly heard complaint, "What are we conserving water for - to subsidize growth?"

Recommendation: This is an information item.