

Water questions continue

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Citing the list of water projects Sweetwater County hopes to undertake over the next 10 years, County Commissioner Paula Wonnacott had some sharp questions for Parker County Water and Sanitation District manager Frank Jaeger at a special meeting of the Board of Commissioners last Wednesday.

Jaeger and two other representatives from the Colorado-Wyoming Cooperative Water Supply Project were in town last week to stump for the formation of a joint powers board, comprised of municipalities across the state, to evaluate the feasibility of transporting water from Flaming Gorge Reservoir by pipeline to communities in eastern Wyoming and Colorado.

In a later conversation, Commissioner Randy Walker expressed concern that "here we are a colony, again, with outsiders proposing to extract our wealth."

"I'm willing to listen," Walker said. "But water is a valuable, valuable resource, and very precious to the citizens of southwest Wyoming."

Jaeger's appearance before the board was one in a series of presentations he made last week on behalf of the project, which aims to secure some portion of Colorado's and Wyoming's undeveloped entitlements under the Colorado Compact of 1922, and to protect the remainder of those allotments through the development of a comprehensive regional development plan.

Currently about one-third of each state's allotted share of water escapes downstream.

"Wyoming and Colorado are the only two states without fully developed entitlements," Jaeger said. "What is available to develop for these two states? We are here to open that dialogue."

A similar agreement is in the works in eastern Colorado.

But Wonnacott wants an answer to a different question. She wants to know how collaboration between Wyoming and Colorado, or, for that matter, collaboration on the proposed pipeline, stands to benefit the people of western Wyoming.

Noting that the Green River Basin Advisory Group and the Upper Green River Joint Powers Board are already deeply involved in assessing and responding to this region's long term needs, she asked Jaeger, "How has their planning and their vision impacted your focus?"

She pointed out that western Wyoming's notorious boom or bust cycles make it difficult to project how much water local industry will require going forward.

"Our future needs are a moving target," she said.

Upper Green River Joint Powers Board Chairman John Zebre echoed that thought when he observed not enough is known about how much water the basin actually has to engage in "intelligent conversation" about committing those resources elsewhere.

Moreover, several projects of more immediate concern to the upper basin have already been identified, including a water line from Rock Springs to the airport, Arrowhead Springs, and Simplot, and the construction of a second reservoir somewhere north of Flaming Gorge.

"If we were to join you," Wonnacott asked, "how would that get us any further?"

"How can you accomplish what people in this room have been working on for 20 years?"

Jaeger contended that there is power in numbers, and that more people and more needs equal more clout.

"The challenge is, if a project is going to be built, it's going to require dollars."

To that end, as Cheyenne attorney and Water Supply Project associate Harriet Hegeman subsequently explained, the proposed joint powers agreement should be seen as a framework for moving forward, first by addressing the current and future needs of regional participants.

"Who are the players?" Jaeger asked. "Who's coming to the table?" -- and, second, by securing the funding to comply with the regulatory process, and get vetted projects built.

"We are looking at (projects like the Colorado-Wyoming Cooperative Water Supply Project) from a holistic standpoint, to ensure that Wyoming's water needs as a whole are met in the future," Hegeman said.

"This project is not to be perceived as sacrificing one area's needs for another."

Under state law, however, any project built after the proposed pipeline would also have a later priority date. Walker wondered out loud what would happen to future development in the region in the event of a water shortage.

"So we say, water is our economy, and you say, OK, we'll shut our water off?" Walker asked.

"I suspect we would have an argument," Jaeger said.

"I suspect we would," Walker replied.

"Change is inevitable," Walker later conceded. "But we need to have access to that resource."

Given the difficulty of securing technical support and funding from Wyoming Water Development and the state legislature, Wonnacott asked, "What is in this region's long term interests?"

"We have a responsibility to see that in 70 years, the water is still here," she added.