

Is the pipeline deal good for everyone involved?

PRO

San Antonio needs the water to grow business

By Joe Krier

FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

As a 40-year resident of San Antonio and president and CEO of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce for two decades, I have always been an advocate for business, economic development and job growth in our community.

There are few things more important to a company considering a move to San Antonio than the availability of water.

We must have a guaranteed, long-term supply of quality water to keep the good jobs we have and recruit the new ones we will need for the children and grandchildren of those who live here today.

I commend the San Antonio Water System for its approval of the Vista Ridge pipeline project and encourage my colleagues on City Council to approve the Vista



Joe Krier is the city councilman for District 9 and former president and CEO of the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

Ridge Water Supply Agreement when it comes up for a vote Thursday.

This is a long overdue, high-value opportunity.

Our community is growing by 20,000 new residents every year. Recent economic impact studies indicate that if we fail to increase our water supply in San Antonio, we will lose billions of dollars and thousands of jobs.

Securing San Antonio's water supply will directly benefit future economic development and job creation.

The Vista Ridge pipeline project will bring 50,000 acre-feet of water annually from the Carrizo and Simsboro aquifers. That's a 20 percent increase over the current supply and will provide enough water for 162,000 San Antonio households.

It includes 3,400 leases for water rights from landowners in Burleson County to bring 16.3

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Rose Fritsche (left) of Lee County and Charlotte Gilman of Bastrop County wait to speak against the pipeline at a hearing last fall. The \$3.4 billion pipeline would transport water from Burleson County.



Scott Huddleston / San Antonio Express-News

However, Kenneth Lauderdale, a water leaseholder, rancher and owner of a crop-dusting company, supports the pipeline. He wants water under his land to go to San Antonio.



Express-News file photo

Critics of the Vista Ridge project fear the extra water will be used to fuel further urban sprawl.

CON

Rural Texas could be next endangered species

By Michele Gangnes

FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

San Antonio's chambers of commerce and real estate developers undoubtedly agree with SAWS that Texans who want to conserve and protect the Central Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, especially its Simsboro formation, should refrain from criticizing the largest turnkey groundwater project in state history.

When the City Council began its review of the project, state Rep. Lyle Larson labeled our opposition to projects such as Vista Ridge "un-Texan."

Perhaps they are nervous because we understand the scheme behind taking our aquifer, our property rights and values, and our future for an ill-conceived, \$3.4 billion, 489 billion gallon water-



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supply project (50,000 acre-feet a year for 30 years).

We have a simple message for the real estate lobby driving the council to vote by Thursday: Grabbing your neighbors' water to fuel unbridled growth outside of San Antonio is morally bankrupt.

To back its claims of broad support in Burleson County, SAWS represents that 3,400 groundwater leases are dedicated to the project, with the inference that 3,400 landowners will receive Vista Ridge royalties.

More than one analysis of the leases listed in the contract have revealed that both numbers are inflated and misleading. In fact, Vista Ridge wells will pump most of the water the state has determined is currently "available" for removal from the aquifer under all of Burleson and Milam counties.

An estimated 1 percent of the two counties' population will benefit from selling their water to Vista

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billion gallons of new water a year to San Antonio by 2020.

This year, the Edwards Aquifer Authority declared Stage 4 drought conditions and limited pumping from the aquifer by 45 percent. Moreover, experts predict hotter and drier summers are in our future.

We depend on the Edwards Aquifer for almost 90 percent of our water supply, so another source of water is clearly needed.

SAWS has done an outstanding job with water con-

servation. Recycled water and stored water have proven beneficial and environmentally sound, and will continue as critical components of our overall water policy, along with desalinization.

However, we cannot fail to secure this long-term water supply. There is simply too much at stake.

The terms of the Vista Ridge pipeline contract will protect San Antonio ratepayers with a fixed price, long-term cost. We will not have to pay for water that is not delivered, and we will not be subject to rising interest rates because the rate will be capped.

This proposal provides wa-

ter security for decades and locks in long-term water at today's rates.

Water is becoming a more valuable commodity because of business and population growth across the state. We can no longer expect to have water at a low cost.

As an example, in 1976, City Council voted against the purchase of a similar quantity of water from Canyon Lake. At the time, it would have cost us \$33 per acre-foot.

Today, Canyon Lake water costs us more than \$1,000 per acre-foot.

While Vista Ridge will require future rate increases, we cannot afford to pass up a deal

like this, especially when we can avoid future cost increases.

Another benefit to this project is the protection it provides for the endangered species in the Edwards Aquifer. By reducing our demands on the Edwards Aquifer, we will help ensure the springs continue flowing for the benefit of endangered species, which is exactly what the Sierra Club has wanted from the beginning.

For those who say this project has been rushed, you should know SAWS has been working on the proposal for three years. By the time the City Council is asked to vote, it

will have held more than 100 public meetings, tours and events to inform San Antonio residents about the plan.

The Vista Ridge pipeline project will improve the quality of life for all our residents for decades to come. This game-changing, historic water project would be the largest non-Edwards Aquifer supply in our city's history.

Recruiting more good jobs and keeping those we already have depend on it.

At long last, the promise of a new water supply is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Now is the time to invest in our future.

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Ridge, as well as their non-leasing neighbors' water, in an aquifer that does not observe property lines.

A pittance will be returned to local communities under leases with cleverly worded royalty formulas while ratepayer money lines the pockets of SAWS' "partners" — a Spanish conglomerate, water speculators, investors and an irresponsible groundwater district.

Raiding a neighbor's water like a greedy bully and privatizing a water supply risks San Antonio's national reputation for stellar conservation and its residents' ability to afford living in their city.

Ratepayers should remember they rejected another public-private grab of our groundwater by SAWS and Alcoa more than 10 years ago. Neighbors for Neighbors, a grassroots coalition of Central Texas environmentalists, farmers, ranchers, rural-to-urban commuters, urban dwellers, elected officials and local businesses, joined with San Antonio ratepayers and environmentalists to defeat that contract.

San Antonians dealt a blow to the same special interests



Express-News file photo

Will the Vista Ridge water be used to fuel more urban sprawl outside Bexar County? Ratepayers should demand a review.

they had defeated twice before in connection with a proposed reservoir.

We commend mayoral candidate state Rep. Mike Villarreal for suggesting a postponement of the council's vote until after the 2015 mayoral and council elections. SAWS' objections to delay are red herrings. The real motive for rushing the deal emerges from SAWS' response to issues raised by members of the council.

SAWS answered "no" to Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales' astute question about whether the water could be left in the ground until San Antonio actually needs it. The rea-

son for that answer is plain and simple. Instead of a brilliant plan for drought, SAWS has negotiated a contract to become a regional water marketer by depleting our aquifer and buying water the city does not need yet — if ever.

Ratepayers should demand an independent review of a contract under which SAWS has deliberately obligated ratepayers to pay up to \$2,343 per acre-foot of water as early as 2020. Otherwise, Vista Ridge water will fuel the kind of development SAWS and developers intend and most urban planners reject.

Should SAWS encourage urban sprawl over the Ed-

wards Aquifer by peddling another community's water to San Antonio's extraterritorial jurisdiction and to unincorporated areas in Bexar County and beyond?

The notion of "if you build it (water infrastructure), they will come (in-migration)" is emblematic of the failed California model of abusing distant water supplies to foster unnatural growth patterns. The council should wait for the city's planning commission to determine if SAWS planners' design for Vista Ridge is good for San Antonio — or just good for the good ol' boys.

SAWS gave no satisfactory response when Councilman Rey Saldaña broached the subject of instituting, prior to the vote, a progressive rate structure to soften rate increases for new water projects.

Vista Ridge alone may require at least a 16 percent increase. Ratepayers should demand this action, but SAWS is caught in a conundrum that effectively prevents it from committing to any timetable for rate review.

Regional customers for an uncertain and interruptible water supply have not come forward to assist SAWS' plan to temporarily "offload" very expensive Vista Ridge water. SAWS had no idea how much

cost ratepayers will have to absorb when it approved the contract. More important, how will San Antonio rationalize signing a contract to pay billions for new water to serve an occasional need when it has also pledged to save at least 5 billion gallons of water a year through conservation?

The folly of Vista Ridge illustrates why I am now a volunteer for the League of Independent Voters of Texas, a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization.

Our mission is to extend the "urban-rural citizens' coalition" model across Texas. Voters must be empowered, across the partisan divide, to take back our state — as well as your city and our water — from special interests. We demand accountability from government, sustainability of natural resources, and affordability to remain in our homes.

Ratepayers, tell the council to abandon one more San Antonio water debacle. Our "Remember the Ogallala" should become your "Remember Applewhite, Alcoa — and Vista Ridge."

Michele Gangnes is also a founding board member of the League of Independent Voters of Texas and Neighbors for Neighbors.