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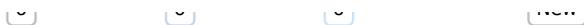
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## Muse: Short-term water, long-term consequences for Hill Country

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Posted: 7:00 p.m. Thursday, March 26, 2015



By Christy Muse - Special to the American-Statesman

The Vista Ridge water project in San Antonio threatens to follow a dangerous precedent: draining water from one region to another in a way that will only increase exurban sprawl in the Hill Country. If this solution seems familiar it should: It's the California model that has led to that state having one year of water left.

The Vista Ridge pipeline is a multibillion-dollar project to pipe 50,000 acre feet of water a year, 142 miles across five counties. That is hugely expensive infrastructure, especially considering there is no assurance about how reliable this groundwater supply will be for the long haul. Aquifers are not unlimited resources.

This is just one of many proposals to pump and pipe water from the Carrizo Wilcox aquifer. It's one thing to assess the impact of a single project over the next decade or so, but

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Water pipes.

groundwater runs freely beneath several counties and several groundwater districts with differing management plans. We don't have the science needed to demonstrate the

cumulative effect of developing this much water long-term. Unless we manage groundwater withdrawals in a way that takes no more than nature can replenish, we will deplete the resource. Then what?

San Antonio has managed to successfully grow at a steady pace and at the same time reduce water consumption with forward-thinking proven conservation strategies.

The San Antonio Water System openly states it won't need this water for many years to come. So to help pay for the Vista Ridge pipeline, SAWS is looking for customers along the way, which is prompting eager developers to jump at the opportunity for short-term profits. One question is how will these new subdivisions continue to provide water for new residents when their contracts are up and San Antonio decides it needs the water?

Flash back 10 years – the Lower Colorado River Authority seemed invincible as it obliged developers with water lines west of Austin. In the end, that hotly debated infrastructure proved to be unsustainable. The Lower Colorado River Authority divested itself of the failing water systems, and water is now scarce for the new developments LCRA facilitated, which have actually increased groundwater pumping and pollution. This is a cautionary tale.

Those of us who opposed the water lines 10 years ago argued that we needed to plan for growth rather than fuel unmanageable growth. For the Hill Country Alliance and others who would like to see a more sustainable future, serious questions demand answers before any of these water

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lines take another step forward.

SAWS isn't kidding when it says "game changing" water project. Texas is unique in that we don't have basic rules about land use and land development outside of our cities. The intensity, location and type of development that occurs in unincorporated areas is currently not planned but is happening anyway at alarming rates.

Piping large volumes of water to rural lands will change the landscape from rural to suburban and exurban. With no rules in place there is little oversight on how this development should occur. Density, wastewater management, water quality, transportation systems, scenic views, ranchland protection, cost of schools and public safety, impact on existing tax-payers – these important issues are not being considered comprehensively.

We submit that a better way is possible and that protecting the Hill Country is worth it. A multi-jurisdictional regional plan could determine what areas can accommodate large densities and what areas need a more conservation-minded approach. Water infrastructure could be planned in concert with other infrastructure needs in a consolidated, conservative and affordable way. To do so, counties would need to be given land use and land development oversight. Any path forward must include a guaranteed commitment to water and land conservation.

"The Hill Country is a beautiful area with limited surface water, limited groundwater and no big city to spread rates across," Robert Puente of SAWS stated. "We would answer the desperate call."

We agree with the first part of Puente's statement, but do not hear that "desperate call." In fact, we believe most people of the Hill Country want thoughtful, appropriate growth that is compatible with our region's unique qualities. We must plan to avoid California's fate. Texas can do better.

*Muse is executive director of the Hill Country Alliance:  
[www.hillcountryalliance.org](http://www.hillcountryalliance.org).*

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The "desperate call" Mr. Puente's SAWS/San Antonio would answer --- by the way, with someone else's water (Burleson-Milam counties) --- is his own utility's and his own city's desperate "call" for takers on a bad deal, Vista Ridge. San Antonio ratepayers, and the City Council that purports to represent ratepayers, should say this is nonsense and find the off-ramp for this \$3.4 billion debacle before it's too late (or lose their seats on the Council in May). San Antonio has the option to terminate this dead letter but the 30-month clock for that option is ticking. Mr. Puente's SAWS desperately needs to offload 45,000,000 gallons a day of water to the Hill Country so its ratepayers won't wake up and realize they have to pay \$100+ million a year over and above their normal water bill, for water they don't need --- BUT at the same time SAWS has to have the option to get it back IF and when SAWS needs it --- what an attractive offer to a subdivision: "Have I got a deal for you, water for maybe 10 years! Or even 30 years! Come on down!" Message to Hill Country: Are you stupid enough that you would not look at this as the non-starter that it is? Or are you sure enough that the Simsboro Aquifer in Burleson, Milam, Lee and Bastrop counties has limitless water to give and you'll just come back for more whenever you need a few billion gallons? What part of "unsustainable" does this State not get?

8:10 p.m. Mar. 26, 2015



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Nice piece, Ms. Muse. Please note that while the legislature is currently in session, no one's groundwater is safe.

It has become clear frighteningly clear during the hearing that took place last night in the Natural Resources Committee in the House, that those who are deliberating on the future of our region's water supply have little clue about groundwater management and have a political agenda. Anyone who deviated was challenged, rebuked or ignored.

9:38 p.m. Mar. 26, 2015

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