

Dipping into our liquid assets

With COVID-19 affecting the economy, does water uncertainty loom in the Valley?

The fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Arizona's economy along with state and local budgets.

But while business as normal has come to a screeching halt in some sectors, the development community continues to hum along. Raising the question: how will the Valley's continued growth impact Arizona's state water planning?

Valley Partnership's virtual August Friday Morning Breakfast brought together three leaders in the state's water discussions to map out how potential agreements will affect the development industry and what must be done to properly manage and deliver clean, reliable water to Arizonans now and well into the future.

Everything from climate change to Colorado River water supplies to West Valley infrastructure projects were on the table as Valley Partnership President and CEO Cheryl Lombard served as moderator.

And while present-day issues were discussed, it was issues and challenges 5 years down the road that drew the most discussion.

Joe Gysel, President of EPCOR USA, the largest private water company in Arizona, said growth strong in the West Valley is creating a need for new infrastructure.

"The challenge is with the goods," Gysel said. "The timeliness of loads coming on; it's hard to do when don't have advance notice. We don't have that planning time. It's tough to make it efficient."

Gysel said EPCOR has completed two projects to keep up with the unprecedented growth in the West Valley: a \$95 million water reclamation and wastewater treatment facility near Luke Air Force Base and a \$29.4 million expansion (20 million gallons a day to 33 million gallons a day) of the White Tank Regional Water Treatment Plant in Surprise.

Tom Buschatzke, Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources said the need for reserve capacity is what he sees as the biggest challenge in the next 5 years.

"Climate change affects how we conserve water," he said. "And we need to conserve water. There is no low-hanging fruit. We also will need to continue to advance our ability to use reclaimed water. Back in the day it was something to get rid of. Now it's not so

simple. We need to be a big player in that debate. The big picture – we need to look under the cushions and turn it something we need for our future.”

Ted Cooke, General Manager with the Central Arizona Project (CAP), identified three areas in which he predicts challenges over the next 5 years: supply, demand and infrastructure.

“The focus on demand will be quite a bit through conservation,” Cooke said. “The importance is the topic of credit transfers, not a new supply. We are also looking at other things such as reclaimed water and desalination. In respect to infrastructure, a challenge is there as well. Having a one-way interconnect in regards to runoff silt will give us more flexibility. In times of shortage, we need to support other things we’re not doing yet.”

Cooke opened the discussion with an update on the seven-state Drought Contingency Plan. Both he and Buschatzke agreed the state’s Colorado River water supply will remain stable for the foreseeable future. The trio also discussed the role the Native American tribes in Arizona play and water wheeling, the ability for CAP to use its canals to move non-CAP water.

Also on their minds was the issue of climate change. Arizona is already on record to have its hottest summer – a dubious record not lost on the panelists.

“We are living through a summer of extreme heat,” Gysel said. “That drives a lot of consumption. Our focus has to be even more on conservation.”

“Climate change is a daily issue we have to face,” Cooke added. “It goes beyond the most obvious. It affects the utilities. Supply. It also affects the power market for moving that water. The hotter the days, the more demand for air conditioning and electricity. Climate change also affects the workforce and equipment.”