

Coping with the Urgent Shortfall Reality

June 19, 2004 Session - Welcome - Alan Armijo, Chair of the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority

I've been involved with and concerned about water since I was little. I grew up in Clayton, in northeast New Mexico. We know about not having enough water in that area Clayton is ten miles from the Texas and ten miles to the Oklahoma border, ninety miles from the Colorado border and about ninety miles as the crow flies from the Kansas border. All that area is very dry. My dad tells about the dust bowl days, and I was reading an article yesterday about the Colorado River and its reservoirs having less water now than during the dust bowl. It's a very big concern.

I've been an educator most of my adult life, taught in Albuquerque High School for nearly twenty-three years, and currently am a lobbyist for APS at the state legislature. The thing about being a politician, an educator, and a lobbyist is that everywhere I go, water is a big issue. It was a big issue this week at our Association of Counties meeting in Farmington. It was kind of nice to walk over the San Juan River and actually see water in it. I drive every day from the West Side [of Albuquerque] over the Rio Grande and I don't know what the Spanish were thinking when they came here. At that time the drought was about equal to this.

I've been on the Bernalillo County Commission for less than a year and a half. I became Chair this year, but was not on the Water Authority last year. I put myself on it and was asked to be chair. It's been an interesting process. It had some people afraid initially, and I worked the state legislature, trying to figure out how we'd start addressing water issues. I'm a regional kind of person--not just for water but air quality and all kinds of things. I thought having a regional water authority for Bernalillo County made sense because we had people in the unincorporated parts of the county who were not receiving services, who were not having a say-so in terms of water rates, no voice. One of the things that was very important to me was that even though we had done a water conservation program for the city, nobody had ever done one for the unincorporated parts of the county. I co-sponsored with City Counselor Eric Griego a few weeks ago a study to look at a conservation program for the whole county. Of course, any time you put a group together, you always leave somebody out--you should have had somebody else on it. It's been my experience that the bigger the group, the less that gets done. We tried to figure out how to address the different shareholders in this region in terms of water and still try to make the group workable. I hope we did that. It will be open to the public so that people will have input. I hope they will come back with some recommendations. The biggest fear I hear from people in the South Valley is that we're going to restrict their wells. I'm not saying that that's a goal this Task Force should have, but it's certainly something we should look at. And certainly as we look at expanding water and sewer lines, and get people off septic tanks to keep from contaminating our groundwater, that's going to be an important issue in how we deal with that.

I looked at your material on how we deal with this issue in the whole state. That's going to affect us, it has to affect us--we cannot be separate as Bernalillo County and Albuquerque and this region. We have to be part of whatever the state is doing. In your guideline here, you talk about is conservation a big issue, and how do we get there, and how when we save water it just seems to go downstream. That's real important but it's not just

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about conservation, it's about how we use that water and how do we get other people to use less of it. For example--I never knew this--we have no way to monitor how much water the fire department uses from their fire hydrants. The hydrants were made to leak underground, to 'waste water' so you could test them. Now we have a valve on those and we're looking at putting meters on them. Just those little things will be saving us millions of gallons. Remember just a few years ago when you'd see a fire hydrant open because sand gets into them and they had to clean it out by running thousands of gallons of water into the street? We're stopping that now. We want to make sure we're not wasting that water. So you start looking at all these little things, besides just you and me going to xeriscape. The TV media used to do a thing on which politician was using the most water. They came to my house and looked at my water bill and the charge was almost not there because I had "zeroscape," either rocks or weeds.

How do we change our watering habits? When I first got on the City Council in late 1989, I suggested we go to alternate-day watering--every other day, odd, even. The Public Works Department said, "Oh Councilor, we have a lake under Albuquerque. We'll never run out of water. Don't worry about it." Well, it turns out, yeah, we have a lake but it's small and it's not going to last forever. I carried the bills--and took a lot of flak for it--that put a series of water rate hikes into effect so we could start looking at this whole San Juan-Chama issue and how we would deal with water in the future. The last [hike] kicked in this May. I took some political heat for that, but I was willing to. I didn't say, "Oh, let's not do water rate hikes--water will be taken care of somehow." I didn't believe in 'somehow.' You have to take action, and you have to move forward. I applaud you all for getting involved, and I thank you. I hope that you will bring to the Water Authority some kind of report; as long as I'm the chair, I will make time for that. We're no longer separate agencies. We're all one. There's only one Rio Grande, and there's not much water in it.

Question: The Commission is always trying to bring industry to the area. I think that's the most wasteful use of water there is. How can you say we have to conserve water when [Governor] Richardson and anybody that's a member of local government always wants to bring in industry that will deplete our natural resources?

Armijo: Certainly economic development is very important. You have to have jobs here. Maybe your kids and your grandkids are planning to stay here. One thing we did on the City Council and the Water Authority has now adopted is that every company that comes in here has to have a water plan in terms of recycling and how they're going to use that water.

Comment: But you have jobs that are created, and most are not hired locally. The people come from out of state. Those people buy houses and use water. It seems to me that we shouldn't be that aggressively looking at bringing more companies to the state.

Armijo: Actually, sixty-seven percent of our growth in this area is internal--New Mexico and Albuquerque residents. So you have thirty-three or thirty-four percent coming in from out of state. Most of the companies that have come in recently hire locally, and there is data to show that.

Comment: One of the things we were talking about yesterday in conjunction with that question was integrating agriculture in Valencia and Sandoval

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Counties with industrial development in Albuquerque, so that food processors and farmers work together. In that way water is utilized to support farmers and maintain agriculture in stimulating the regional economy.

Armijo: Those are things you should bring forward to us because we want to be part of it.