Placitas Area Watershed
June 19, 1999 Planning Workshop

Another 50 Years of Water
Del Agua Institute

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Placitas Area Watershed – Planning Workshop Report

INTRODUCTION

On June 19, 1999, the Del Agua Institute (DAI) held a planning workshop in Placitas to discuss the potential to create a watershed plan for the Placitas area. Approximately 25 people attended the workshop held at the Las Placitas Presbyterian Church. The purpose of the workshop was to outline key characteristics and issues related to the area's water resources as well as stakeholders who should be invited to join the planning effort. This session was the first of three workshops aimed at launching a community-wide water planning coalition. The workshop was funded through a grant from the River Network of Portland, Oregon.

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Introductory remarks by Reid Bandeen, Peter Maggiore and Rosanna Vazquez provided a regional context for the workshop, insight into the importance of long-term water planning for Placitas, and background about the role of Sandoval County in the planning effort. In a series of working sessions, the workshop participants identified: (1) special qualities of the Placitas watershed and water resources; (2) key water issues for the community; and (3) stakeholders who should be included in the planning process along with methods for soliciting their participation. The workshop concluded with a discussion of next steps.

In a working session over lunch, we learned that some attributes of Placitas that are important to residents include the setting, natural beauty and extraordinary landscape that give Placitas a strong sense of place. Residents enjoy the rural setting and low density of development. Historic buildings, "living acequias" and cultural traditions give residents a strong sense of history as well, and people who live in Placitas tend to be open and respectful of the population's diversity.

When the groups identified characteristics of the watershed and water resources, workshop participants recognized that there are three major types of water supply features: (1) aquifers located in complex geologic structural environments, (2) the Rio Grande Basin aquifer, and (3) surface water. They noted there are a variety of water types including ancient (non-recharged) water, recent (recharging) water, and potable ground water. Ground water is extremely variable in its availability and recharge, and the quality of water is also highly

variable. In many areas of the community septic systems interact with ground water sources. In addition, the participants noted that the acequias tie the village together, and the ditch system creates a strong community.

During the session on water issues, the participants agreed there is a pressing need for better information and knowledge about ground water supply. There are likely to be conflicting interests between individual water rights and the needs of the broader community as well as between the needs and rights of long-term residents, new residents and future generations. Additional issues include well contamination, water quality, the impact of future development and the survival of acequia agriculture. There are also jurisdictional issues and uncertainties about future public water policy.

In the final workshop session, the groups identified stakeholders ranging from residents to institutions, organizations, businesses, and government agencies. The final section of this report provides a complete list of stakeholders.

SPECIAL QUALITIES OF THE PLACITAS AREA AND WATERSHED

After a welcome by the Del Agua Institute and a short presentations by Peter Maggiore and Roseanna Vasquez, the participants broke into three small groups to begin a series of brainstorming sessions. During the first session the groups discussed the special qualities that bring people to Placitas. The discussion focused on: **"What are the special qualities of Placitas that we value most? "** During the first exercise the groups recorded the following special qualities of the region. (The list begins with the most frequently mentioned qualities and progresses to additional qualities.)

Most frequently mentioned special qualities of Placitas:

- There was overwhelming agreement that Placitas is a special place. Its setting, natural beauty, and extraordinary landscape give Placitas a strong sense of place. "I fell in love with Placitas; it calls my soul and gets in your blood."

- Many participants called attention to Placitas' community identity. "There is cultural, ethnic and professional diversity." "People are friendly, open and reach out." "There is low crime and no gangs."

- The concept of "Las Placitas" is evident in the area. The participants agreed that the rural setting and low-density development make it attractive as a home. "Placitas is <u>not</u> on the road to anywhere; and is not a thoroughfare …yet."

- There are beautiful views and vantage points — over the mountains, river, and plains. There is wild life, diverse natural habitat and wild horses. "My family came here to picnic and get away from the city; I have memories here." "The quiet atmosphere and night sky are wonderful."

- Most people value and recognize Placitas' history — "We can see a long way back; there are archaeological/pre-historical resources, historic buildings, places and traditions." "There is a living acequia."

Additional qualities:

- The climate is wonderful.
- Placitas is desirable for new people and development for the same reasons existing residents find it desirable.
- We can fish up and down Las Huertas Creek, and be up at the crest in a half hour. We're close to the canyons.
- Placitas in located near a number of Indian pueblos.
- Placitas has good water—low levels of chlorine.
- Lack of governmental organization — people telling us what to do.
- The open space is wonderful and there is low population.
- We are close to city services.
- Elaborate geological features, this is a "whole" and "complex" area.
- Others: _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

In addition, the groups identified characteristics of the water resources and watershed that are unique. The key question that focused the discussion was: **"With regard to water, what are the unique characteristics of the Placitas area watershed?"** During the hour-long discussion the groups identified the following qualities of the watershed, beginning with the most frequently mentioned qualities:

Frequently mentioned Characteristics of the Watershed/Water Resources:

- The acequias tie the village together and this makes the village into an oasis. The ditch system also creates a strong community—everybody works to keep the ditches clean; it "works." We need to increase representation of the traditional community.

- The acequias and village water system supply *both* domestic and irrigation water. It is a community-run organization, elected from water rights owners.

- There is the possibility of smaller water boards; establishing as area water commission; but not without the community water systems.

- There are three types of hydrogeologic systems: Fold and fracture, basin aquifer, and surface water. There are multiple springs in area.

- There are a variety of water types: Ancient (non-recharged) water; recent (recharging) water; potable ground water; bad water; hard water; lead water/arsenic water; and no water.

- Septic systems can be called the good, bad and the ugly. They interact with the ground water sources.

- The surrounding land ownership is complex because of the Land Grant, two Pueblos, and National Forest land, City land and other federal lands.

- New development may have effects on water, viewsheds, small riparian and associated habitats, and possible effects of water draws from the gravel pit. Development above Dome Valley will create 28 new wells. There is concern that the area is becoming over-developed.

- Groundwater is extremely variable in availability and recharge: West of the S-curve is all right, however, there is danger of contamination from septic systems; East of the S-curves, it is variable.

- There are differing levels of quality—depending on where you are located, north and south.

- Ground water resources are a "mystery"—there is not much known. For example, the emergency well near Ranchos was only 35 gpm. We need to know a lot more about ground water resources.

Additional unique water resource characteristics:

- There is a potential for increasing the amount of water harvesting.
- Ownership of senior water rights.
- Immediate climate and weather (regional and area climate). Clean air
- There is time to plan; we're not in a crisis yet. There are two styles of planning (1) acequia (communal); and (2) newcomer (individual).
- Lack of requirement to seal domestic wells—there is threat of contamination.
- The upper wells are dependent on winter snowfall; their depth can fall 12 feet.
- Land with good wells and good topography can serve more people.
- All the water in the Middle Rio Grande is already appropriated.
- Others: _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

KEY ISSUES IN WATER PLANNING IN THE PLACITAS WATERSHED

Next, the Small Group leaders turned the discussion toward identifying water planning issues and encouraged the participants to work in an inclusive, brainstorming fashion. The question participants addressed was: **"What are the key issues important in water planning in Placitas?"**

During the lively discussions, the groups captured their thinking about water planning issues important for Placitas. The responses from all three groups are listed below, starting with the most frequently noted issues first.

Most frequently mentioned issues:

- Everyone agreed there is a pressing need for better knowledge about ground water supply. "We need to make the water study public—get the information." There are so many fragmented groups concerned about the amount of water available (e.g., Bureau of Mines, USGS, this group, the Pueblos, the Land Grant heirs, the county, the city of Albuquerque, etc.) "We don't know the supply baseline."

- When we consider individual water rights, some of the concerns are the legacy of our children, survival, and the aesthetics and beauty of our community and homes. There is a conflict between personal interests and public planning. Are people willing to give up their unused water rights and share water resources? "There is a pressing need to develop better communication between long-term residents and old timers." "How much new development can the systems sustain?"

- Continued/long-term economic and social viability of acequia agriculture is not clear. There are mounting pressures to re-engineer existing systems (i.e., drip systems), create or add storage capabilities, and institute water conservation measures. "Does all of the water get used? Where does it really go? How does it really leave the system?"

- Well contamination: When septic systems and water well bore holes are in close proximity, the septic waste often leads to well contamination. There is an increased risk of percolation from septic systems in parts of Placitas where there are fractured strata, however, recharge of pockets in the fractures are a problem. "State law doesn't protect for groundwater contamination from septic systems."

- Quality of water: Water tests measure for old standards, i.e., potability, heavy metals, etc. What about arsenic? Organic contaminants? "We need better regulatory definitions, monitoring and enforcement."

- Public policy: Future changes in public policy are not known. Placitas does not have defined "hydrologic boundaries." Resource ownership is fragmented among private, public, and community interests and the regulations and philosophy around each differs.

- New development: Guidelines on development should be based on water availability. We should assess the impact of new development on water supply and measure the effects on existing users. We need to estimate effects of new development on schools, traffic, and noise. "Is it possible to absorb the proposed new development and maintain rural character?"