

Talk of the Town: Water without annexation

GARY BEVERLY Special to the Courier
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The new Prescott City Council is demonstrating refreshing transparency while debating a revised water policy. The draft policy has been available for public comment for several weeks. Comments submitted by the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) are posted at cwagaz.org.

Special interests have published letters in the Courier in support of the old policy of permitting water/sewer services to un-annexed areas. Their argument is that having new homes on sewer will use less water than septic tanks. That is true under some circumstances, but it is far from the whole story.

Water without annexation is a poor policy for many more reasons:

- It restricts the city's ability to manage growth and constrains planning options for roads, open space, and wildlife corridors.
- It foments urban sprawl by violating multiple provisions of the voter-approved 2015 General Plan, which sets Prescott's housing priorities as infill, affordable housing and multifamily housing and gives multiple reasons why sprawl is undesirable.
- It bypasses Section 4.A of the City Charter (Prop 400).

Water without annexation will facilitate extensive development of Yavapai County lands north of the airport that otherwise lack water by permitting density to grow to six or more homes per acre instead of the current county 2 acres per home. Homebuyers strongly prefer city water over drilling a well.

Water without annexation will add to the current glut of new water-consuming homes authorized by the previous council. According to data from the Yavapai County Contractors Association, for the 6-year period 2015-2020, the city averaged 353 building permits per year. Prescott reports to the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) that committed demand for water is 3,534 acre-feet per year (afy), enough water for over 20,000 homes at 0.17 afy/home. At the current rate of building permits, the next 56 years of residential development is now zoned with committed water service. Despite ADWR's recent report that the Prescott AMA cannot achieve safe yield, this baked-in growth will only make our water problem worse.

Every new home consumes groundwater and increases the stress on our aquifers. You might be surprised to learn that for an average existing single-

family home, only about 29% of groundwater pumped is recharged. The losses are due to leaks, landscape water use, and direct reuse for the golf courses. This recharge fraction is roughly equivalent to a home with a septic tank recharging 0-35% depending on the local soils and location. For new homes complying with the city's post-2020 water conservation and landscape policies, the theoretical maximum wastewater recovery for recharge from a new home is only 80% - assuming no groundwater is used for landscaping, which is still allowed. You can learn the details at cwagaz.org.

We conclude that every new home, with or without annexation, consumes groundwater and that due to landscape water use and direct reuse, recharge from current housing is roughly similar to septic tank recharge.

Instead of allowing water service without annexation and awarding water for yet more development, Prescott should focus on decreasing water use for the already approved lots by investigating, then developing, new city procedures and codes to require Water Neutral Development. This would assure that new construction has no net impact on the aquifer by eliminating outdoor water use and landscape irrigation, and by recovering stormwater for permanent recharge.

Providing water without annexation will promote growth and increase water use. Prescott's revised water policy should not permit water without annexation.

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