

Our Water Future Is Not For Sale

By MEREDITH MCGUIRE, Co-Chair of the Alamo Sierra Club Conservation Committee

San Antonio's business-as-usual is putting our water future at risk. Last week Brooks City Base sought rush-rezoning approval to allow Niagara Bottling to put San Antonio's water in plastic bottles to sell nationwide. This, while San Antonio Water System (SAWS) wants us to spend \$3.4 billion on the Vista Ridge pipeline to bring incredibly expensive additional water to San Antonio. City Council fortunately paused the zoning deal, but it did not kill it. It should; it is a bad deal for our community.

The first problem is the very idea of having a bottling company in San Antonio. Despite recent rains, we are not a water-rich region. No water bottling company is sustainable here, no matter how much water we pipe in from other areas. Niagara is trying to get out of the Los Angeles region precisely because of California's water crisis. Why should San Antonio allow Niagara to come here to hasten our own?

If we are to be prepared for the impacts of climate change and the very real likelihood of severe droughts, San Antonio must protect our water supply vigilantly. We live in a semi-arid region that is going to experience, in the foreseeable future, what researchers call "unprecedented drought conditions." New data, reported this March in

the New York Times, suggest the strong probability of a 35-year-long drought before the end of this century. How can we withstand such a drought? Not by increasing consumption of water. Not by exempting existing commercial, industrial, and institutional SAWS customers from having to take appropriate measures to increase their water-efficiency. And certainly not by allowing water to new businesses whose profits come only from selling our water elsewhere.

SAWS' "solution" to our regularly dry circumstances is the costly Vista Ridge pipeline, which would bring supposedly "excess" water from Burleson County at a much higher price than water we already have. SAWS expects current residential rate-payers to pay for that pipeline, while giving new businesses like Niagara cut-rate access to the water that is already here.

SAWS calls Vista Ridge water "drought-proof." That is a gross misrepresentation. Water from the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer is already being overcommitted and might not be there for us if drought conditions persist. Rather than encouraging increased conservation and water efficiency – especially from San Antonio businesses – SAWS and the

SAN ANTONIO'S SACRED WATER

By Kamala Platt

There are strong environmental, social justice-based and economic reasons for City Council to reject plans to bring a California Water Bottling Co. to San Antonio, but my words below speak to the deep history of waterways—interactions of peoples and water—in an attempt to understand what is more deeply at stake.

I came to live in San Antonio to teach at the University of the Incarnate Word. I had not been there long when someone told me about the Blue Hole—an ancient deep, deep spring on what is now UIW campus that has been visited for centuries by those seeking to live in league with the earth. The rising flow of waters—Yanaguana springs—reflect the health



The Blue Hole at the University of the Incarnate Word

of this place's water and her peoples' relationship to her. Understanding this, as a newcomer in 1997, I perceived I was a straggler on an ancient waterway.

After I decided to find a house here, I spent time in the neighborhoods I favored and found that in the heart of the city's west side, on an island and along the shores of Elmendorf Lake, a gathering of herons, egrets, and cormorants roosted in front of Our Lady of the Lake University. These birds may have helped me find a house 6 blocks away because once I noticed them I kept returning and eventually saw the "for sale" sign on my home, of now nearly 14 years. Over the years, the herons at the lake have offered a sense of solace when I was sad and celebration when I was happy, a sense of belonging to a world ordered by a balance of natural and cultural integrity; this "place of

Chamber of Commerce are promoting San Antonio as a place of “abundant” water. That is a recipe for water disaster.

Picture San Antonio in 2035 with another 800,000 residents, mainly living in sprawling suburban developments with lush mega-lawns and water-gulping landscaping. Imagine many new businesses – resort hotels with golf courses and luxurious spas, refineries, and bottling companies – all attracted by this so-called “abundant water,” subsidized by city residents.

Then severe drought hits. The city can’t get any of those profitable water-guzzling businesses to cut back their water usage significantly. Residents who have never learned how to live with drought are furious about watering restrictions. The city finds itself using more water than projected from the Edwards Aquifer, just when the amount of water coming from Vista Ridge is reduced by 50% or more, because the Carrizo-Wilcox is overdrawn.

We must not wait until we are 10 years into a mega-drought to start preparing for living with drought as our “new normal,” thanks to climate change. To deny the possibility – indeed probability – of serious, prolonged drought is to set our city up for a water crisis more disastrous than that facing Los Angeles right now. Such a drought in our community would not be a “natural disaster,” but rather a humanly caused one.

The Vista Ridge deal was a bad decision in the first place, because it puts San Antonio at serious financial risk. But more serious is the fact that the mirage of “abundant” Vista Ridge water is preventing our community from investing its effort and money in local measures that could truly prepare

us for the future. I describe some of those measures in “Re-Framing San Antonio’s Water Future,” which is available online (<http://bit.ly/reFraming>).

Brooks City Base must not be allowed to offer Niagara Bottling access to San Antonio’s water. If Niagara is allowed to build its bottling plant, we will be stuck with a water-guzzling company that refuses to cut its production when San Antonio is in another drought. San Antonio should allow only sustainable growth. Niagara and similar businesses are certainly not sustainable.

Those of us who have studied water issues appreciate the Council’s postponement of the zoning decision about Niagara, which the Brooks staff tried to sneak through without notice. And we agree with Councilmember Ron Nirenberg (D8)’s assertion, as quoted by the Rivard Report, that “the implications for our water supply need to be discussed in full public view.” That’s a good start, but it’s not enough.

Council must take ample time to consider the policy issue of whether to allow new so-called “development” that would gobble up our community’s precious water. Vista Ridge must be reconsidered in light of a better vision for our community’s water future.

Council must also listen to the people about this policy matter. In the past, time and time-again, our community has defended our water. We want to be part of protecting our water future.

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herons” has made patterns of profound beauty —markings that read like a map to lead me home.

Given these experiences, it was not surprising that when sitting in support of the residents at a Council meeting deciding the fate of the Mission Trails Trailer Park, I connected with descriptions of their place along the river particularly when a woman in a bank-side trailer stated, “I go down to the river, when I feel depressed, and I’ve been by the river a lot lately.”

I knew that the proximity of the river beckoned developers to Mission Rd., too, as I know that the money-making potential of water beckons those who have negotiated quietly with Niagara, a California water company from the Los Angeles vicinity. They would invite Niagara to San Antonio to partake in the planned spoilings of the Vista Ridge pipeline, a purchase made possible by raising water rates, potentially putting city water out of range for our city’s least compensated residents.

San Antonio’s current water hogging plans remind me of LA’s decades of piping water that devastated Owen’s Lake. That comparison, ironically, led me back to Yanaguana, and the ancient sense of wellbeing preserved

in the presence of water in the Blue Hole. Was Owen’s Lake, now named the dustiest place on the continent, also a sacred place for millennia? I found my answer at <http://bit.ly/OwensLake>.

“For 800,000 years the 110-square-mile lake held water, though its shores changed drastically along with the climate,” said Ted Schade, air pollution control officer for the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, a government agency that oversees the area. “Owens Lake ... was always shallow,” he said. “A drop of one foot would expose lots of shore. History shows that Native Americans were living here, and when the lake was low they spread out.”

Few would argue that sacredness lies in how we treat earth, our home, and each other everyday. The balance that the peoples of this continent kept for thousands of years was upset in water decisions of the 20th Century and is all the more at stake in our water decisions today.

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