

Neighbors criticize SAWS

Utility's 50-year plan makes some wonder if it's a water hog.

By JERRY NEEDHAM
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Verbal sparring erupted among regional water planners Thursday over the San Antonio Water System's proposed new long-term water plan.

Some questioned whether the utility is abandoning a neighborly approach and claiming the Edwards Aquifer as its own.

"I'm getting a little nervous with SAWS," said Con Mims, Nueces River Authority general manager. "We have reached a point in recent years where a lot of your neighbors were looking at you as being a better neighbor than you used to be."

Under the updated 50-year plan, which trustees are to consider adopting at their Aug. 16 meeting, SAWS would buy the rights to 25,000 acre-feet of Edwards Aquifer water it currently leases, as well as an additional 35,000 acre-feet.

It would build a plant in South Bexar County to treat 10,000 acre-feet a year of brackish groundwater. It also would abandon expensive and ambitious projects to develop water supplies from the lower Guadalupe River and the Simsboro Aquifer.

An acre-foot is equal to 325,851 gallons — enough water to meet the annual needs of two average families of four.

SAWS' partners in the lower

Water plans compared

The San Antonio Water System's 50-year plan to provide water to its customers is more optimistic about the area's future water needs than a similar regional plan. That's important because SAWS is dropping some ambitious water projects favored by its neighbors.

■ **SAWS predicts** an almost 5 percent lower growth rate within its service area and almost 4 percent higher growth rate in the greater metropolitan area by 2050 than does the regional plan.

■ **SAWS predicts that water use per person** in Bexar County will be about 10 percent lower than regional planners project.

■ **SAWS' plan to handle a worst-case scenario** is based on the region's third-worst drought in 1980s instead of the worst drought in the 1950s.

■ **SAWS estimates its existing supplies** from the Edwards Aquifer during drought is 6 percent more than regional planners estimate.

Source: HDR Engineering study

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

Guadalupe project — the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and the San Antonio River Authority — have been critical of the latter decision and want to proceed with the Guadalupe project.

The SAWS board, along with the City Council, also is expected to decide by year's end whether the utility should focus solely on satisfying the needs of its own customers or build larger projects and become a regional wholesale water provider.

The 21-member South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, which has spent three

years updating its own 50-year water plan, due to state officials Jan. 6, was presented a comparison by HDR Engineering of the two plans on Thursday.

"It appears to me that this is an attempt to discredit the SAWS plan, and that appears unfair to me," SAWS President David Chardavoyne said after the hour-long presentation.

SAWS had paid \$3,500 of the \$9,500 cost of the comparison study commissioned by the planning group.

Chardavoyne said he received a copy of the comparison study at 11 o'clock the night before the 9 a.m. meeting and hadn't had a chance to review it.

"This is public retribution by the river authorities for SAWS recommending cancellation of the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project, which is a water marketing tool for GBRA and SARA and certainly not a legitimate water-management strategy," said Bill Jones, who represents agricultural interests on the planning group.

Jones represents a ranching family that could have suffered from groundwater withdrawals by the project, among the many rural interests opposed to it.

But others said SAWS' continuing reliance on the Edwards could spell trouble for others who depend on the aquifer and the rivers supported by its springflows.

"Some of us want to see the non-Edwards factor come sooner because who knows when we're going to get in the next dry cycle," said Bill West, general manager of the GBRA.

jneedham@express-news.net