

**SAWS chief recommends canceling water project**

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The San Antonio Water System's CEO has decided to recommend to the SAWS board that the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project be canceled.

If the project is indeed dropped, Victoria Mayor Will Armstrong said Monday, the result will be "bad for Victoria."

"Without the Lower Guadalupe project, there's no guarantee that water will be available for Victoria out of the river during droughts," said Armstrong.

Bill West, general manager of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, said he feels the recommended cancellation is tied to possible approval of legislation - now being debated by lawmakers in Austin - that would allow San Antonio to pump more water from the Edwards Aquifer.

The Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project's Victoria-area waters were intended to supplement the Edwards, long San Antonio's sole supply, as a water source for the Alamo City, West said. In turn, flows into the Edwards-supplied springs that feed the Guadalupe River would be protected.

Partners in the state-water-plan project are SAWS, GBRA and the San Antonio River Authority.

"Above all, we're disappointed that SAWS has decided to withdraw from the project," said West. "It looks like (SAWS is) going back to its old ways of relying on the Edwards - to the detriment of everybody else."

He said GBRA's main goal with the Lower Guadalupe project was to protect the springs and the river, which, he said "are the lifeblood for everybody up and down the river, including Victoria."

He said the springs, during the mid-1990s drought, contributed about 70 percent of the water in the Guadalupe at Victoria. "There's an example of how important those spring flows are," said West.

Without the Lower Guadalupe project, Mayor Armstrong said, the city of Victoria will not be able to take advantage of a contract under which GBRA would provide Canyon Lake water to Victoria during times of drought, he said.

"The city won't be able to exercise the options that were in that contract for water that would give our children and grandchildren a secure water source," said Armstrong.

West said canceling a much-needed alternate water supply for San Antonio, while allowing an increase in pumping from the Edwards - if the Legislature indeed approves a pumping hike - would "endanger the economy and the environment in every city up and down the river, as well as the San Antonio Bay bay-and-estuary system."

West said the pumping-hike legislation, to which GBRA objects, is found in a provision of Senate Bill 3, the omnibus water bill. He said if the provision survives, it could result in the potential for "destructive litigation."

Ann Hayden, spokeswoman for SAWS, said Monday that SAWS chief executive officer David Chardavoyne has decided to make a recommendation to the (SAWS) board to end participation in the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project.

Chardavoyne's decision was the result of work by a SAWS committee that is reviewing a list of water-supply options being considered by SAWS, she said. The committee made its decision around the end of last week.

Hayden said the SAWS board will consider dropping the project at its June meeting.

"It's up to the board to make that decision," Hayden said.

GBRA's West said SAWS' Chardavoyne informed him last week of the proposed cancellation.

"He told me their committee had made that recommendation and he would be taking that to the SAWS board for approval in mid-June," West said. "He felt confident that they'd approve it."

West said he was told it was a combination of political, economical and environmental factors that led to the decision.

But West said he felt it was "no coincidence" that the Legislature is considering a bill this week that would permanently increase the Edwards Aquifer pumping cap from 450,000 acre-feet per year to somewhere in the neighborhood of 572,500 acre-feet.

The increase amounts to just a little more water than would have been produced in a year by the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project.

The Lower Guadalupe project is designed to take water from under the ground in Victoria, Goliad and Refugio counties, along with Guadalupe River water drawn from near Tivoli, and, beginning in about 2012, pump it by the billions of gallons to San Antonio via pipeline.

The project drew strong opposition from Victoria's D.M. O'Connor Interests, the Goliad County Groundwater Conservation District and other groundwater-protection advocates in the Victoria area, who were concerned about its impact on local water wells, the environment and the economy.

"This is a very important moment," Bill Jones said Monday. Jones is an O'Connor spokesman and a member of the Region L planning board, the body that plans water projects for the region.

"Any movement by SAWS to pull out of the project is certainly good news for Victoria and for rural Texans in the lower Guadalupe basin who care about their water," said Jones, who said he will now seek to have the Lower Guadalupe project eliminated from the Region L water plan.

Jones also said the O'Connors support the raising of the pumping cap to allow San Antonio to more heavily rely on the Edwards Aquifer.

"We're hoping that we see a better management of the Edwards," said Jones. "That's really the key to San Antonio's economic future, not drawing on water supplies from 125 miles away."

With the Guadalupe so heavily allocated to various users up and down the river, he said, Victoria-area residents should focus their concerns on the area's groundwater.

"The only real thing you can count on is the water beneath your feet in the Gulf Coast Aquifer. That's what we believe people in our area should be protecting," Jones said.

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