

ANOTHER VIEW

Vista Ridge too costly, inflexible

by Terry Burns

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Re: "Vista Ridge project is a necessity for S.A.," Other Views, Weir Labatt, Oct. 12 :

This opinion piece is the latest in a decades-long string of business leaders' inflated projections that San Antonio will run out of water if we don't build the mega-project du jour.

San Antonio residents, when given the information and opportunity, can smell a bad deal and have consistently chosen water conservation over water boondoggles. We have never had that choice about the Vista Ridge pipeline.

SAWS wants to raise water bills a cumulative 50 percent over the next few years, not the 16 percent Mr. Labatt says. Family incomes in San Antonio have stagnated for more than 10 years; rate increases will be a major burden for lower-and middle-income families. That will hurt our local economy.

Mr. Labatt states: "Conservation alone is not enough." Perhaps, but the 2012 SAWS Water Management Plan does not support that, and SAWS will not release its 2015 Water Management Plan.

Mr. Labatt says: "The Vista Ridge project is San Antonio's best large-scale water opportunity in decades." We don't know that, either. City Council failed its fiduciary responsibility to obtain an independent analysis of the project. It did not ask any questions, and it refused to listen to the many questions asked by concerned stakeholders such as Sierra Club.

Sierra Club opposes interbasin water transfers and a California-style water grid. That system is extremely expensive to build and maintain, uses a huge amount of energy, permanently depletes aquifers, spurs unsustainable sprawl, and wreaks environmental havoc.

Sierra Club supports wise water use, not the "WaterCitySA" that developers and SAWS want to promote.

Sierra Club holds that we can meet our future water needs by refocusing city planning to protect the Edwards Aquifer, promote only low-impact development, and emphasize capture and use of rainwater. We believe that other water sources, such as the desalination project, are better as our backup. They can be built as needed, at far less cost. SAWS CEO Robert Puente said so himself. If Vista Ridge is not built, SAWS could easily ramp up desalination.

Vista Ridge is an extremely costly and inflexible investment. We must pay for all that water, whether we need it or not. Who is going to pay for it in 20 years if people have reduced usage so much that we use even less water than now?

The city should properly evaluate alternatives to Vista Ridge, and obtain both the final water policy study and the 2015 Water Management Plan. It should slow down when committing \$3.4 billion. It should sponsor not SAWS media events but real public discussions over at least 30 days, prior to council voting. Abengoa, the Vista Ridge contractor, has a greater than 90 percent risk of default in five years. We should not rush to embrace it.

Terry Burns, M.D., is co-chair of the Alamo Group, Sierra Club.