

City has suppressed controversial water report

City has kept it hidden despite coming vote on SAWS rates

By [Brian Chasnoff](#)

September 21, 2015 Updated: September 21, 2015 9:38pm

Last week, I asked the city to share with me a comprehensive report on San Antonio's long-term water security that was completed in draft form six months ago. City officials refused to release it.

Now I know why.

On Monday, I got my hands on the 235-page report through alternative channels. Co-authored by researchers at Texas A&M University, it bashes the Vista Ridge water project, a pending \$3.4 billion initiative by the city-owned San Antonio Water System.

The report "is designed to review and assess the many factors important in implementing effective water policies," the executive summary states. "The timing of the analysis for the City of San Antonio (COSA) allows it to be considered as part of the discussion to complete a new comprehensive plan."

Timing is critical. Next month, the City Council will vote on a new SAWS rate structure, and the pricey Vista Ridge project, a 142-mile pipeline to deliver water from Bureson County, could raise the utility's rates by as much as 16 percent.

Yet two months after the completion of the most recent draft of the report, city staff still has not provided it to all council members, nor offered even a briefing. Mayor Ivy Taylor's office, however, has been briefed on the report.

This does not sit well with Councilman Ray Lopez, chairman of the city's Utilities, Technology and Transportation Committee.

The mayor "wanted to slow the process down by sending it to our committee for review," Lopez told me Monday. "My concern is: How quickly will it come here, and is there anything that we're doing that that report would recommend against? We don't know that because we haven't seen the report."

Requested more than a year ago by Councilman Ron Nirenberg, the report describes and assigns risk ratings to 12 water sources for the city.

When it comes to the Vista Ridge project, it takes a decidedly dim — some might even say biased — view.

“Claims by Vista Ridge advocates that both aggressive water conservation goals and the Vista Ridge water project can and will be funded simultaneously are going to be hard to justify to ratepayers,” the report states.

In another section: “For critics of the project and even project supporters, it seems hard to imagine SAWS ratepayers will understand a 16 percent-plus rate increase if the ‘plus’ relates to unsold water from the Vista Ridge project due to conservation efforts by SAWS ratepayers, especially when continuation of the conservation efforts requires funding.

“Critics have also questioned whether the Vista Ridge project is another example of SAWS and the City of San Antonio reverting to an insensitive mode with regard to their roles in the region,” the report continues. “The Vista Ridge project could well be perceived as San Antonio ignoring the interests of its rural neighbors to obtain more water for its own growth, and stifling the future of the Burleson/Lee County area so there is water for new San Antonians to water their lawns.”

One would be forgiven for confusing “critics of the project” with the report’s own co-authors.

The lead writer, Calvin Finch, is the former director of the SAWS Water Conservation Department. Even more damning than his opinions are the ratings he assigns to facets of Vista Ridge, designated in the report as a “high-risk” project.

Finch designates the “distance of (water) source from San Antonio” as an exceptionally risky facet of the project, expected to begin transporting up to 16.3 billion gallons annually by 2020 from the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer.

Overall, the independent analysis puts the city at odds with its own utility. But that’s no reason for city officials to suppress it.

“I think what we need to do is wrap our arms around what we mean when we say we want a transparent government,” said Lopez, who has requested a copy of the report and a briefing by city staff. “Transparent means sharing even when it’s not flattering.

“People want to see (the report),” he added. “How do we make these incredibly hard decisions, especially about SAWS and rate structure, without seeing it? ... Are there things there that are outside of the scope of the report? That’s fine, but let us make that determination. We’re big boys. Not having the report in hand is not a transparent approach. The decisions on policy belong to the elected officials, not city staff.”

bchasnoff@express-news.net