

A few good snowfalls and we seem to forget that the fundamental problem of this region is a large and growing population in an arid climate marked by severe intermittent droughts.

Over the years, we have been warned of our water problems by state engineers and by numerous private and quasi-governmental studies, including the massive inter-governmental "Water in the West" study of 1998.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has for years warned that the American Southwest is in for hotter, drier weather. Now, a new study from the U.S. Climate Change Science Program adds urgency to that prediction. It warns that the American Southwest may already have entered a "sustained period of intense drought." A study led by the U.S. Geological Survey adds a somber footnote: "The death rates of trees in Western U.S. forests have doubled over the past two to three decades ... driven in large part by higher temperatures and water scarcity linked to climate change."

We have been warned, but we aren't listening. The city of Santa Fe continues to plan for more growth. It wants to "develop" the Northwest Quadrant, which is now mostly piñon-juniper, and it plans to annex most of the Santa Fe County land between the Santa Fe River and Route 599 (after it absorbs some fragments of county land in the urbanizing southwestern part of Santa Fe).

Presumably, the city's purpose is to urbanize that mostly open land and thereby increase its tax base.

For its part, the county is presently updating its General Plan, which it calls a "Sustainable Growth Plan." The title itself reveals its fatal flaw. "Sustainable growth" is an oxymoron, and in the long term so is "smart growth." Growth eventually becomes a mathematical absurdity in a finite space. Invoking the word "sustainable" does not avoid the consequences of the effort to keep growing. Even our present population will be in a water crisis if we are moving into a serious, sustained drought. The County Commission and the City Council should be trying to stop growth rather than facilitate it.

We are moving backward. In the dry years a decade ago, water was a very hot topic. A

national faith in perpetual growth. 64 percent of city residents opposed to further population growth, and various city councilors and county commissioners agreed. Former Mayor Larry Delgado in August 2000 proposed that the city budget new housing construction to match anticipated water availability.

Perhaps we should not be too hard on the present crew. They are facing an iron alliance of those who benefit from growth in the short-run: developers, Realtors, merchants. Those advocates sidetracked Mayor Delgado's proposal. They keep winning, and the imbalance between people and resources continues to widen. What the city and county propose, in effect, is to require residents to pay for a future population expansion that should not happen. Most residents' interests are in conflict with those who momentarily profit from growth.

To understand our officials' actions is not to endorse them. I would urge (1) that the City Council draw back from its expansionist proposals and begin to develop a strategy to stop growth; and (2) that the County Commission renegotiate its understandings with the city and revise the draft new General Plan to reflect a commitment to living within our resources.

Some readers may point to the San Juan-Chama diversion, or to the irrigated lands of the San Luis Valley and say: "Stop worrying; we have plenty of water, and we can buy more." To them, I would say: Hopes for that diversion have dwindled to a point where it will do little more than make up for the Buckman wells' decline, and the estimated total project cost has skyrocketed from \$20 million to \$216 million. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling prevents us from importing water across the latitude of the Otowi Gauge on the Rio Grande.

Some growth advocates argue that we can get plenty of water by desalinating sea water or saline aquifers. I could answer those arguments, but not in this space.

This may be a good time to get back to the population/water issue, when our national economic crisis is shaking the

national faith in perpetual growth.

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