

It's time for a regional conversation about water

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A few weeks ago, the American Canyon Eagle ran an editorial contrasting the city's challenges obtaining a reliable water source for our community with the demand for new development. The editorial focused on the proposed Watson Ranch development; however, there are other proposed projects that would serve as suitable examples. I would like to provide some additional food for thought on the issue of water supply.

The city purchases nearly 100 percent of its water from the State of California by siphoning raw water from a slough northeast of Travis Air Force Base. The raw water is transported through pipes to the city's water plant on Jameson Canyon Road where it is purified before being delivered to homes and businesses. When the state's water system runs low, as it is now during this drought, the state simply does not sell us much, if any, of this water. The city has to go shopping for water from other sellers, typically at a higher price because it's a seller's market. The city does not have reservoirs or lakes in which to store water to meet demand during very dry years.

So, what can we do to improve our long-term water supply? Constructing new reservoirs is very expensive and environmentally difficult. Perhaps the city could acquire access to an existing reservoir that is not used? Few exist, and those that do carry large price tags. Drilling wells might be a possibility, but groundwater wells also raise environmental questions and are not typically favored for urban purposes in Napa County.

We continue to study these options. However, by far, our best option is simply to reduce our consumption of potable water. This can be done in two ways: turning down the spigot to use less water and substituting the use of recycled water whenever possible. Several months ago we asked everyone to voluntarily conserve 20 percent, and we are very grateful you have responded to the call. Water consumption in April was down 25 percent from last year, and overall we are down 10 percent for the year. Please keep up the efforts even during the heat of the summer – it really does make a difference.

Our best opportunity for water conservation in American Canyon is to use recycled water instead of potable water wherever possible. The city's wastewater treatment plant can produce approximately 150 million gallons of recycled water every year, yet we use only 60 million gallons citywide. The recycled water distribution system is not complete and not available in every section of the city. Completing this system and connecting businesses, parks and landscaped areas to recycled water lines is our highest priority. The city will save 12 million gallons annually by switching over many parks and landscaped areas. If the recycled system was complete, businesses and other users could save as many as 90 million gallons more per year of potable water.

Which takes us right back to the question of new development and water supply. Why do we consider approving new development given these kinds of water challenges? Every proposed project will be required to meet the highest standards for water conservation. In addition, developers will be required to offset their demand for potable water by conserving water somewhere else in the city, switching a current use of potable water to recycled water, or providing a new water source sufficient to meet their water needs. Thus, new projects will have a “zero water footprint” and not increase demand for potable water citywide. Without this policy, we simply could not approve additional demands for potable water at this time.

The city supplies water to a much larger area than just the city limits. Before the City incorporated in 1992, water was provided by an independent water district with boundaries that are larger than the current city limits. The city retained the larger water service boundaries after incorporation, and today our water service area extends all the way up to Soscol Ridge on the north, to the river on the west, and to the county line on the east. We provide water to the airport industrial area as well as several wineries along Highway 12. Millions of gallons of wine are produced and bottled in the airport and Green Island industrial areas each year. As the economy improves, we are seeing increased demand for water throughout the water service area, most notably for new residential units in the city and wine processing and warehousing in the airport/Gateway and Green Island industrial areas.

Why does such a demand for development exist in the south part of Napa County? For many years, Napa Valley residents and leaders have sought to keep the northern portions of the county rural and agricultural to support and nurture the wine industry, from which we all benefit. However, as the wine industry grows, and along with it the expansion of the hospitality industry, so does the need for employees, processing plants, warehouses, trucks, and equipment. With few options for affordable housing and large wine processing facilities north of Napa, the demand pushes southward to American Canyon, where we have easy access to urban areas, highways and rail service.

Need land for a large wine warehouse or winery? Your options in the county are either the airport or Green Island industrial areas.

Need to accommodate affordable housing for workers? In an agreement made several years ago, American Canyon is taking responsibility for unincorporated Napa County’s regional housing needs for the next eight years or more.

Just as the residents and businesses in the south part of the county benefit from the wine industry to the north, so does the wine industry to the north benefit from American Canyon’s housing, industrial spaces, and water.

In recent years, our partners in Napa County have recognized the value of this relationship and have joined with us to begin addressing the traffic issues facing American Canyon. We appreciate their participation in tackling this important regional problem. Now it’s time for acknowledgement that

American Canyon plays a key role regionally, and that demand for our water will only increase as industrial and residential uses continue to push southward. We greatly appreciate the city of Napa, county of Napa, and the Solano County Water Agency for stepping in to help facilitate solutions this year. But, just like traffic, it's time for a broader, regional conversation about the future of our water supply.

Dana Shigley is the city manager for American Canyon.