

Water utility must retain autonomy

By Douglas Rittmann

Guest columnist

Should politicians or professionals control our water and wastewater system? This is the question El Pasoans need to consider.

City Council is considering the dissolution of the Public Service Board. This is not a new idea. The council controlled the water utility from 1910 to 1952, and it was a failure. Planned water-supply projects were used as a "political football" every two years when elections were held.

In 1952, Mayor Fred Hervey and the City Council recognized this. They separated the water utility from city control and placed it under the five-member Public Service Board. Four members, who are professional representatives of the community, are appointed by City Council to four-year terms. The mayor is the fifth member of the board.

The intent is to run the water utility as much as possible like a business. Profits from water sales are reinvested in future water supply development rather than paid to stockholders, as is done in private corporations. Texas law permits landowners to own the water beneath their property, and the Public Service Board has se-

cured much of the city's future groundwater supply by acquiring land, which is under its control.

I worked for El Paso Water Utilities for nearly 30 years and retired as the water systems division manager. I was proud to be a part of this professionally managed organization. Its accomplishments include: (1) one of the lowest water

rates in Texas, (2) the state's best water-conservation program and lowest per-capita water use, (3) use of the best available treatment technologies at water and wastewater treatment plants, (4) continual superior water-system ratings from the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, (5) leadership in water reuse, and (6) providing a consistent water supply to its customers more than 99.97 percent of the time.

Many of my professional utility associates from other cities envy the way our utility is managed and structured. They complain that their city-run utilities often suffer from political decisions affecting service, priorities and deferred maintenance.

Building water supply projects and wastewater treatment facili-

ties requires long-term planning and implementation that usually exceed politicians' elected terms. Since elections occur more frequently than the term of the planned projects, the new administration can reverse the decisions of the previous administration. Stagnation occurs and projects are cancelled. Similar problems occurred when the city controlled the water utility.

Under the Public Service Board, El Paso Water Utilities has achieved national recognition for excellent service and sound management. It was one of only 44 municipal water utilities recognized last year by the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies for outstanding achievements in competitiveness strategies and improvement initiatives.

El Paso faces serious water-supply challenges resulting from binational and bistate sharing of water resources; it must have independent policy management. The Public Service Board must remain autonomous if it is to be successful in ensuring the long-term water supply that is vital to the region's economy and quality of life.

Douglas Rittmann is an environmental consultant with more than 30 years' experience in various water and wastewater treatment and operational positions.



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