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Watershed moment: Ensuring SA region's economic prospects don't dry up

Protecting and preserving San Antonio's core asset and competitive edge may require a regional effort.

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As San Antonio seeks to retain and recruit companies and talent, one of the city's key assets is its water resources.

"Recent data requests to our firm indicate water security as a paramount site selection factor. It is viewed as essential infrastructure," said John Boyd, principal with The Boyd Co. Inc., a national site selection firm.

One of San Antonio's strengths is its access to the Edwards Aquifer, an underground layer of porous, honeycombed, water-bearing rock. The San Antonio portion of the



GABE HERNANDEZ | SABJ

General Manager Roland Ruiz of the Edwards Aquifer Authority on Friday, Aug. 19, 2022, at the EAA Field Research Park & Observatory in San Antonio.

aquifer stretches roughly 160 miles from Brackettville to the West to Kyle south of Austin.

"I think we're in good shape in terms of securing it as a resource for the foreseeable future from a regulatory standpoint, from a management standpoint," said Edwards Aquifer Authority General Manager Roland Ruiz.

Looking to the future

While the Alamo City has some control over the Edwards Aquifer and has diversified with additional water resources, anticipated population gains will place more demand on the inventory. In addition, what happens in other jurisdictions could affect the quantity and quality of that aquifer water moving forward.

There are key areas and other water sources outside the jurisdiction of the EAA that impact the Edwards Aquifer, including parts of the Texas Hill Country that have become a prime target for new development.

"We don't have regulatory authority or purview for those aquifers," Ruiz said. "But we know that the Trinity Aquifer, for example, provides some amount of subsurface recharge to the Edwards. The concern could be what happens if the Trinity gets overdeveloped, what happens to the Edwards in terms of recharge."

There are some concerns about the long-term impact of continued population gains and development on the region's water resources. Boerne Mayor Tim Handren has said that city needed to be more proactive in its water strategy to keep pace with the growth.

"We have to be looking, we have to be thinking about long term now, about sources of water and ways to conserve water," he said. "If you're not in front of the infrastructure, then the development only compounds the problems."

Areas across the U.S. are dealing with existing and potential water shortages. On Aug. 16, federal officials announced that Arizona and Nevada, dependent on water from the Colorado River, will face more water cuts as one of the nation's largest reservoirs, Lake Mead, was at less than 25% capacity.

"These two states are chief competitors of Texas for new industry and jobs," Boyd said.

Some of the corporate poaching tied to water concerns is already occurring.

"We are seeing new targeted efforts by locations like eastern Washington, with abundant water and hydropower capability from the Columbia River, aggressively targeting California manufacturers," Boyd said.

He also noted there are concerns about water availability in markets like Phoenix, Las Vegas and even Central Texas, and that increasing demand for water resources, coupled with ongoing droughts will create new challenges for corporate recruiters.

"Economic development professionals in San Antonio will have added responsibility to talk about commitments to issues like water availability, quality and cost, and ecosystem restoration," Boyd said.

Building regional support

San Antonio's lead private-sector economic recruitment organization, greater:SATX, has taken on a more regional strategy in its corporate outreach. Sarah Sanchez, senior vice president of corporate location advisory services for greater:SATX, said the availability of water is one of the assets recruiters are touting.

Sanchez pointed, for example, to the San Antonio Water System's more than 140-mile Vista Ridge Pipeline, which was completed in 2020 and delivers groundwater from Burleson County to San Antonio.

"We're fortunate that SAWS has a plan in place and has implemented and invested in diversifying our water supply to prepare for the growth that we're seeing," she said, noting that one of the options her organization is pitching to prospects is access to the utility's non-potable water supply.

"We're in a good position," she said.

Ruiz says protecting and preserving those water assets is going to require a regional buy-in and help from outside of San Antonio that

could include land management and conservation discussions to help “mitigate what could happen as those areas develop.”

Ruiz added, “We're moving towards nonregulatory approaches.”

While the Edwards Aquifer Authority could play a key role in regional talks, so could greater: SATX.

“We can elevate the need and efforts to focus on having the assets in place in the region, to support all of our economic development efforts,” Sanchez said.

Meanwhile, Boyd suggests the scramble among cities and states to recruit and retain companies is likely to become more intense over near- and long-term water concerns.

“Regions of the country are being eliminated from the get-go due to concerns about water availability,” he said.

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