



## Public Policy Review

by Sharon Megdal

### To Be or Not to Be a Good Collaborator on Water Issues

*Some "Be's" to heed when working with others*



I recently spoke at the Verde Watershed Citizens' Groups Conference, which was organized by the Sedona League of Women Voters. About 85 people assembled on a Saturday in January to discuss how they can better coordinate and collaborate to resolve regional watershed issues. This type of effort is of great interest to me, not only in my current position, but as I reflect upon my past experiences, including serving as

executive director of the now-defunct Santa Cruz Valley Water District and serving on the State Transportation Board for six years. As I thought about what might be useful for this talk, I came up with a "Be" list for working collaboratively. This column is based on the comments I made at the conference.

- Be willing to compromise. Compromise is not a bad thing. The word processing thesaurus includes the following synonyms for "compromise:" cooperation, negotiation, concession, conciliation, finding middle ground, and give and take. Compromise is necessary when developing solutions to complex challenges.
- Be consistent and reliable. While positions may be modified and compromises accepted, consistency and reliability are essential when establishing positions. Once a tentative agreement has been reached, don't attempt to further advance your position. In addition, follow through is important to build trust. If you are representing others in a collaborative process and are unsure whether the entity/group will support a particular position, mention this up front.
- Be willing to put effort into forging alliances and partnerships. Along with helping you attract and leverage existing funds, alliances also increase your visibility as a participant/player at many different levels. The Arizona Rural Watershed Alliance, the Southern Arizona Water Users Association, the Water Conservation Alliance of Southern Arizona and the Northern Arizona Municipal Water Users Association are all organizations that have formed over the past several years. They have enabled their members to pursue programs that meet common needs and to articulate positions more forcefully than if articulated by individual members. Looking for efforts to collaborate with others can result in the often sought "win-win" outcomes. Several recharge projects in the Marana area, for example, benefitted from collaborative efforts. Several partnerships were developed, some including a privately held farming operation.
- Be mindful of institutional settings (e.g. the strictures of established laws and regulations) but recognize that it is possible, within reason, to change laws and regulations. It may be painful, time-consuming and sometimes expensive, but change may be necessary. An example of this is the effort to gain authorization for multi-jurisdictional water facilities districts. The need to facilitate the financing of water projects involving more than one water entity has been under

discussion for several years. The legislation introduced as HB2480 reflects a continuing effort at compromise. (See first bullet above!)

- Be patient and persistent. Most solutions to complex problems require considerable effort. Sometimes the "two steps forward, one step back" experience applies. Other times it may seem like you are going in circles. But if the circles are converging, progress is being made! It takes time to develop and implement plans, programs and projects, with the length of time dependent on a number of variables, including the complexity and funding requirements associated with the effort.
- Be careful what you ask for. For example, you might successfully gain legislative approval for a provision you believe will benefit your effort, only to find out later that the statutory provision impedes future progress. I believe this happened with the Santa Cruz Valley Water District. At the request of the district's board, statutory changes were made to the governance and financing structure of the district. These changes later raised concerns about the district's permanent formation and caused sufficient stir that the district was not permanently established. Another example is the Phoenix Active Management Area gaining statutory authority to establish a groundwater replenishment district, with mandatory membership for AMA water providers. The district, if formed, would have levied a property tax. This funding source was considered important to the success of the district, which, in turn, was viewed as important to the success of the region in reaching safe yield. The property tax concerned city councils, whose approval was a prerequisite to district formation. The district was never established.
- Be willing to put up resources, both monetary and in-kind. The scarcity of financial resources affects our ability to resolve physical resource challenges. Putting up resources is a sign of commitment to the effort and can help attract more resources. This is certainly true of the Rural Watershed Program authorized by the Arizona Legislature and many other successful efforts.
- Be inquisitive — ask questions. Some people are hesitant to ask questions, yet questioning can be very productive. The "no question is stupid" rule applies.
- Be a leader. The value of good leadership is well-recognized. Leading sometimes means taking risks by proposing ideas and project concepts that take some time to germinate.
- Be willing to work hard.

This 10-element "Be" list is by no means comprehensive. While many obstacles may exist to arriving at collaborative solutions to local, regional and statewide water challenges, examples of success are many. We can learn from the failures, the bumpy roads followed, and the successes of collaborative efforts. Sharing these experiences will be a significant part of the Water Resources Research Center conference scheduled for May. (See page 10 for information about the WRRC conference.) I hope to see many of you there! 🏠