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Vista Ridge plans need more scrutiny

While SAWS rushes to sign the Vista Ridge Water Project, a \$3.4 billion project to pipe and pump 50,000 acre feet of water a year from Burleson County, and city leaders and the media line up in support, there is a critical need to pause and review the potential downsides of Vista Ridge.

The project's carbon footprint should be a consideration, since San Antonio is committed to the Mission Verde policy and becoming a Top Ten Green City. San Antonio has not estimated nor has a plan to address our carbon footprint. Vista Ridge plans will move up to 50,000 acre feet of heavy water uphill and over 142 miles for 30-plus years that will require prodigious energy and produce un-quantified carbon emissions. How can San Antonio leaders justify this added climate burden and that from the resulting development and population growth it enables without knowing the impacts?

The project claims on water availability also challenge us to question assumptions, risks, and fairness. The huge Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer arcs across the state from the Rio Grande to the NE corner border, its water moving within and between some of the aquifers above and below (cross-formational flow). This means impacts in one area may affect other areas. The Carrizo Sand and Simsboro Sand formations are the proposed sources of Vista Ridge water. They can provide base flow to springs and rivers—in this area to the Brazos and Colorado Rivers—from surface outcroppings, which also receive recharge. The ground water is used for mining, agriculture, livestock, rural homes, manufacturing, power and municipalities. [A key 2002 Texas groundwater recharge study](#) suggests that in this segment, the major rivers will continue to receive groundwater discharge even with certain assumptions about increased pumping and drought conditions. Are those assumptions justifiable, and what climate change data was used, if any? Any reductions in river base-flow and the magnitude should be answered before large projects such as Vista Ridge are allowed to proceed, as should impacts on existing wells and other uses that will need addressing.

It is well known that surface and groundwater is over-allocated in Texas, so as we get hotter and drier, growth advances and demand rises, therefore the risk of cutbacks will grow. The Post Oak Savannah Groundwater District's (POSGD) [Director Westbrook claims](#) they have 125,699 acre-feet annually permitted, with average production in the past five years at 13,080 acre-feet, with a peak of 20,296 in 2011, and its modeled available groundwater is only 61,020 acre-feet annually. [A 2005 ground water assessment](#) (Wade, 2005) indicated that the recharge in Burleson County's segment of the POSGD Carrizo Wilcox aquifer averages just 13,000 acre feet per year—only about one fourth of the 50,000 acre feet Vista Ridge promises to deliver to SAWS from Burleson County. Where will the other 3/4ths come from? It will flow in from neighboring properties, unless prevented by equally heavy pumping in neighboring districts. This and other studies commissioned by the Texas Water Development Board, show the major impact will be the permanent and significant drawdown of aquifer levels. The prospect is already spurring a water war. A busload of citizens from the Burleson County area plans to descend on our city hall under a campaign with the battle cry "Remember the Ogallala".

To be sustainable, aquifer drawdown should be no greater than recharge. Yet Texas policy is "managed drawdown," meaning we are allowing our aquifers to drop to support ever greater populations, thus

putting more people at higher risk. Wade's 2005 study reported that by 2050 the draw down in the Simsboro aquifer will be more than 200 feet, with significant drawdown mapped in most areas of that and the Carrizo Sands formation. Other [modelling requested of the Texas Water Development Board in 2003](#) by the POSWD showed dramatically greater drops in the Simsboro by 2030, based on a possible scenario that pumps 20% less than the amount permitted there. The [2002 Texas groundwater recharge study](#) estimated the highest recharge rate in the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer to be 5.8 inches per year, with much less in some areas. We must be assured that current consensus on Texas climate change precipitation and evaporation projections be added to modeling and that we apply precaution to the large availability discrepancies that such an inexact science produces.

SAWS estimates Vista Ridge costs will add 16% to rates over 5 years. We must question this figure and the assumptions it is based on. If VR water will be one fifth SAWS' supply at about \$2200 an acre foot—about 4 times the highest cost water of Edwards Aquifer—which is 90% of our supply now—then a quick calculation shows this will raise acre-foot costs by about 60%. SAWS promises a special “lifeline” rate for certain low-income clients, but other low and middle income sectors, suffering under stagnant income and rising inflation, will be hurt too. Vista Ridge advocates also claim SAWS can mitigate this rate hike by selling the extra water early on, but who would buy this expensive water as anything but for temporary, high value or stop gap purposes, as buyers can lose access to the water and might not have it when it is most needed—in drought or as necessary supply for a now larger, dependent population.

\$3.4 billion, or \$110 million per year (or whatever the final bill), will largely flow out of the local economy toward a foreign company, its sub-contractors, and Burleson County landowners, costing San Antonians and our local economy. What might San Antonio accomplish if that money were redirected here toward sustainable development?

Business interests, led by the Chamber of Commerce, insist we need this water, in addition to other desalinated and fresh water projects, to keep and attract jobs to meet the growing population, and that we need minimal government regulation and all benefit from growth these expanded utilities foster. No one has challenged these assertions. City, county, and utility leaders appear in thrall to this claim and an inevitable, desirable, and manageable high population growth, estimated at about 20,000 per year. Continuing to engineer our way around natural limits to growth without adequate critical evaluation is a tailor-made, high- cost gamble. More water and high resource input and cost will feed already high and unsustainable population growth driving the Alamo Region into the downsides of sprawling, large urban areas: environmental degradation, higher costs, pollution, congestion, crowding of schools and parks, alienation, crime, and need for more planning, infrastructure, administration, and ever further reaching and risky efforts to control vital resources and waste sinks. That runs up against the growing Texas movement for small government and low regulation and taxation.

Have we learned nothing from the history of water wars and society collapses over water resources? Is San Antonio blind to all the cautionary tales, such as that of Los Angeles and its desertification of Owens Valley and other cases, documented in *Cadillac Desert* and other sources?

The City recently set a precedent on costly, controversial projects by withholding its \$32 million for the streetcar and promising a broad-based committee study, public education, and a vote on the project. The Vista Ridge deal, at more than 100 times that cost, and with many glossed-over downsides, needs the “pause button.”

Margaret Day, Executive Committee Chair