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PV council approves new contract for lobbying/public relations for Big Chino project

By Ken Hedler

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(From left): George Orlik, Howard Mechanic and Tom Steele confer Thursday evening before the Prescott Valley Town Council voted to approve a new contract for lobbying/public relations for the Big Chino pipeline project.

PRESCOTT VALLEY - Opponents of the Big Chino Water Ranch pipeline project argued unsuccessfully against the Town Council approving a new contract for lobbying/public relations for the project to import water from the Paulden area.

Howard Mechanic, chairman of the public policy committee of the Citizens Water Advisory Group in Prescott, questioned the legal authority of the council to award a contract. He contended the intergovernmental agreement from December 2004 between the [Town of Prescott Valley](#) and [City of Prescott](#) for the Big Chino project empowers the Prescott council to make decisions on contracts.

Mechanic added town officials have not responded fully to public records requests regarding the existing contract for lobbying/public relations with Greenberg Traurig.

He and other opponents of the pipeline project raised similar concerns this past November after the council approved that contract. They oppose the project because they fear importing the water would harm the Verde River.

A new contract came up for a vote Thursday because the town's main contact at Greenberg Traurig, Mitch Menlove, left the company to join Policy Impact Communications in Washington, D.C. The contract, which will begin July 1, will be for the same amount as the existing contract at \$12,000 a month, with Prescott Valley paying 46 percent of the total and Prescott paying the majority.

"What are they doing" for public relations? Mechanic asked.

Deputy Town Attorney Colleen Auer disputed Mechanic on the legal authority and public records issues before the council voted 6-0 to award the new contract. Councilwoman Lora Lee Nye did not stay for the vote because she had a previous engagement.

"Initially, you are talking about the interpretation of the contract," Auer said, referring to the IGA. "We are not withholding any (public) records that are responsive."

However, Auer said some requests for disclosure involve attorney/client privilege. She disputed Mechanic's contention that the IGA requires approval of the contract by both councils.

The council listened to comments from four other Big Chino critics, beginning with George Orlik, a member of the Center for Biological Diversity. The Tucson-based environmental group has threatened to sue Prescott and Prescott Valley.

"I am strongly opposed to any public funds to be used to further this agenda," Orlik told the council. "It is my opinion the town government appears to favor landowners, developers and business people."

Councilman Harold Wise retorted Orlik veered off the agenda item.

An Orlik ally, Rex Cullen, asked whether the town would raise the tax rate to pay for the contract.

Town Manager Larry Tarkowski responded new growth will pay for the project. He added the town is using proceeds from the sale of effluent credits as well as water fees to pay for the Big Chino project.

Prescott Valley is participating with Prescott in the project because both communities are in an active management area that the Arizona Department of Water Resources heavily regulates, Tarkowski said. The AMA requires both municipalities by the year 2025 to recharge as much water into the aquifer as they pump.

"Importing water is the only way to reach that goal," Tarkowski said. "We must import water."

Tarkowski added, "This community has repeatedly said our action will not impact the headwaters of the Verde River."

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