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Sierra Vista Ariz., development pressures may dry up local river

By Thomas Stauffer
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SIERRA VISTA, Ariz. -- As Tucson and Phoenix grew, so shrank the water in the Santa Cruz, Gila and Salt rivers into the sandy, dead fingers they are today. Today, those at the helm of the "boomlet" playing out in Sierra Vista say that unlike the standard Southwestern model, the San Pedro River and a growing population can indeed coexist.

Two developers plan to add more than 11,000 homes to Sierra Vista over the next two decades.

Add a steady spate of wildcat development in the unincorporated areas around the town 70 miles southeast of Tucson, and what results is a level of growth that will tax even the most earnest of water conservation efforts, environmentalists say.

The Center for Biological Diversity has sounded the most recent alarm over groundwater pumping in the area with a complaint lodged against the Arizona Department of Water Resources claiming consumer fraud. The department should not be allowing developers in Cochise County to guarantee a 100-year water supply that doesn't exist without sacrificing the San Pedro, a federally protected river, the center's Robin Silver said.

Measures prompted by the specter of the potential closure of Fort Huachuca -- the largest employer in Southern Arizona -- over the health of the San Pedro already have Sierra Vista working harder to save, recharge and harvest water than most cities do.

But regardless of the success and extent of water-saving steps in Sierra Vista and Cochise County at large, steady continued growth in the area probably makes the long-term survival of the river dependent on importing water, a technically daunting, vastly expensive solution.

"It's my opinion that we have to keep the water flowing in the river, but there's a big caveat here," said local developer Judy Gignac, manager of Bella Vista Ranches. "We're going to be able to do a lot through conservation and detention and recharge, but that's only going to buy us time until we can figure out a way to augment our water supply."

Solving the water problem in the area with the grandiose idea of bringing Colorado River water to Sierra Vista is a cop-out, said county resident Ted Mouras, a systems engineer who does contract work for Fort Huachuca.

"The whole CAP solution is essentially disgraceful, the idea that we're not going to fix the deficit ourselves, that we're just going to take water from someplace

else, from a river that's already over-drawn," he said.

Mouras sat in a curious position last year relative to Gignac and the water issue in Sierra Vista. Bella Vista South, the company that provides water to his home, implemented water restrictions on its customers due to low supplies, Mouras said. At the time, Gignac managed both the water company and the development company, he said.

"Up until very recently, we've probably been in some level of restrictions for at least the last 24 months," Mouras said. "The irony of the whole situation is that Judy implemented water restrictions on the customers, and it happened to be the same week when she proposed a new 4,800-home development to the county supervisors."

No one is advocating stopping growth, but at some point, an effort should be made to manage it, said Tricia Gerrodette, president of the Huachuca Audubon Society.

"The thing is, water isn't limiting development at all right now, and there are some citizens here who would tell you that this is insanity," she said.

In addition to the 4,800-unit Bella Vista Ranches, Castle & Cooke Arizona is planning a 6,900-home development in Sierra Vista.

While more than 11,000 homes from those two developments alone sounds like a lot more than just steady growth to an area of 43,000 people, they'll be stretched out over time, said Rick Coffman, vice president and general manager of Castle & Cooke Arizona.

Only about 500 units of the development are platted and under construction, and the company expects "about a 20-year build-out," he said.

"Sierra Vista is issuing about 600 permits a year, so even if we were getting half of those, it would stand to reason that it's going to take 20 years or so to have all those homes in," he said.

A drive through Sierra Vista could easily have motorists thinking the town is booming, while actual numbers show only a small rise in growth, said Marie Hansen, a public information officer for Sierra Vista.

"What you see in our overall population figures is actually zero growth, but try to tell people that when they see all the tile roofs going up," Hansen said.

What's not seen is that Fort Huachuca is getting out of the housing business, razing its World War II-era housing at a rate that virtually cancels new home construction, she said.

The fort has eliminated about 800 to 1,000 "family units" as part of an attempt to mitigate the on-post use of water, said Bob Strain, mayor pro tem of Sierra Vista and member of the Upper San Pedro Partnership, a consortium of 21 agencies, organizations and entities, including Bella Vista Water/Ranches.

"Getting rid of all those leaky old lines

helped the fort reduce its consumption quite a bit," Strain said. "They also have some pretty strict turf regulations and other water-efficient measures."

Sooner or later, the fort will eliminate all the housing it needs to, and if it survives the next round of base closings, it will no doubt grow, Gignac said. The Defense Department is expected to close about 25 percent of its facilities next March, meaning many of those spared closure will bring in more personnel, she said.

"I think the prospect could explain some of the building going on, but for the most part, it has to do with low mortgage rates and a lot of people coming from California," she said. "The fact is, this is a great place to live, and maybe we're just now really getting discovered. It's not what I would call a boom -- maybe a 'boomlet.' "

While Sierra Vista has cooler temperatures and small-town perks such as less crime and less traffic, cheaper housing prices are no longer the rule.

New houses start at about \$150,000, a price similar to that for comparable houses in the Tucson area, said Sierra Vista Realtor Cate Kreutzer.

"If you compare apples to apples, I'm beginning to hear that we're actually more expensive than Tucson," Gignac said. "We're further away from where the materials are, so it costs to get them here, and skilled labor is really tight here. Those are two big factors right there."

Despite the attractiveness of the area, Sierra Vista has never seen the spiked growth of areas such as Phoenix and Pinal County, said Ken Jones, director of the Cochise College Center for Eco-

nomic Research.

"If you look back over the last 10 years, we've had some healthy, steady growth, but nothing I would call rampant or even accelerated," Jones said. "On average, we're growing somewhere around 2 to 2.5 percent on an annual basis."

Strain gave a long list of measures the city has taken to reverse the water deficit. Steps include:

--An Environmental Operations Park, which features 30 acres of recharge basins for wastewater.

--About 100 detention basins designed to slow down water in washes and drainages so that it percolates into the aquifer instead of running off or evaporating.

--City regulations that, among other things, prohibit outdoor misters, restrict golf-course construction and mandate the use of low-flow fixtures and low-water-use toilets.

--An outreach program called "Water Wise" partially sponsored by the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Program that educates the public on water conservation.

The Upper San Pedro Partnership advocates measures such as purchasing easements to retire former agricultural areas and agricultural field restoration, or restoring the native grassland ecosystems by removing mesquite trees, which pull much more water than grasses, Strain said.

While Mouras and Gerrodette said the partnership "does a lot of good science," it doesn't have the authority to make any real decisions that would manage

growth or balance the water deficit.

"The partnership is filled with good ideas, almost none of which they can force the implementation of," Mouras said. "Given that Arizona as a whole -- and certainly this community from Benson south -- is pro-growth, what's the probability that you're actually going to see them pursue some real change?"

No one particular step can alleviate the water shortfall that results when more is pumped out than what is naturally recharged, but the right combination of steps could, said Bill Childress, director of the Bureau of Land Management's San Pedro office and a member of the Upper San Pedro Partnership.

"As a partnership, we're charged with finding ways to balance the deficit, the amount that's being pumped versus the amount that's naturally re-charged," Childress said. "But what guides the bureau is that we have the higher responsibility to protect, conserve and enhance the San Pedro."

Congress created the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, which the BLM oversees, in 1988.

Regardless of water-saving efforts by the fort, Sierra Vista and Cochise County, the 3,000 or so unregulated private wells in the county and the flurry of wildcat subdivisions cropping up in nearby areas such as Palominas, Hereford, Tombstone and Benson complicate the conservation strategy, Strain said.

While efforts to somehow manage or at least monitor such wells and wildcat development would no doubt help con-

servation efforts, it's unlikely to happen, Gignac said.

"(Subdividing) in the county is seen as a means by which those who are not totally affluent can get their share of the American dream," she said. "It's a private-property rights issue, and the flag gets wrapped around it, and it becomes extremely emotional."

County areas outside Sierra Vista are growing at two to three times the city's rate, said Chuck Potucek, Sierra Vista's city manager.

"Right now, state law really limits the county's ability to control that kind of thing," Potucek said.

The creation of an active management area, one designated by the Arizona Department of Water Resources as requiring active management of groundwater, would at least give local stakeholders the authority to enact steps -- authority the partnership lacks, said Thomas Maddock III, a UA hydrologist.

But even with that authority, there may be no way for the county to grow -- no matter how responsibly -- and still keep water in the San Pedro River, Maddock said.

"Remember, you live in a desert," he said. "You have to put all the good reasons for moving there up against the fact that you don't want that river to end up like it did in Tucson with the Santa Cruz."