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Proactive approach to growth sought

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SIERRA VISTA — With major growth facing the Sierra Vista Subwatershed area in the next four decades, the community must be forward-thinking in ensuring it has the infrastructure in place, Sierra Vista Assistant City Manager Mary Jacobs said.

Cochise County Planning Manager Mark Apel agrees, adding local governing bodies and state agencies must be involved.

However, Michelle Harrington, the rivers program manager for the Center for Biological Diversity, said more must be done to ensure the San Pedro River and its riparian area are protected from the current and pending growth.

With the potential that Arizona's Sun Corridor, a megapolitan area running from Prescott in the north to Cochise County in the south, will see at least a doubling of the state's population by 2050, Jacobs and Apel said incorporated and county regions must be prepared in advance and not wait until a development proposal crosses a planner's desk.

"We already do a better job in traffic and transportation planning," Jacobs said about how Sierra Vista is involved in looking at the needs for future developments.

The city is part of regional statewide planning efforts. When a subdivision process begins, how it will fit into arterial and collector routes is already available, she said.

When a subdivision goes through the planning process, there are certain triggers that help smooth the way, Jacobs added.

But that doesn't mean "your best laid plan doesn't have problems," she said. Having a system helps limit the number of problems.

The city is currently working on the Castle & Cooke Tribute plan, a proposed subdivision of more than 6,900 lots, and the infrastructure portion of the proposal is coming along well, Jacobs said.

Where high capacity is expected, such as the case of Tribute, constant review of the proposal and any changes are major concerns for the city, she said.

Planning for newer developments that may happen because of the Sierra Vista region is part of growth throughout Arizona, Jacobs said. It is something city officials take seriously.

"We're way ahead in the game than older cities and towns," she said.

But it is hard to predict what will happen until proposals are made and the process begins.

The number of building permits fluctuate. There recently have been between 500 and 600 a year issued by the city, Jacobs said.

Part of the growth planning system includes water issues. Jacobs said the city is actively working on collecting effluent, ensuring proper desert landscaping and requiring other water-saving devices are used as part of the community's efforts.

At the same time, the city has constructed water detention basins that will help recharge the aquifer and provides flood control for city residents, she said.

What is important is the city's detention basins "are flood protection for our citizens," and some of them have helped residents by removing them from flood zones, Jacobs said.

In the early 1980s, the Army granted the city easements to about 78 acres of Fort Huachuca

property to build and maintain the basins.

Basin construction has received some financial backing from the Upper San Pedro Partnership, a group of federal, state and local agencies, as well as environmental and business groups. The partnership funds different projects as part of its goal to ensure both the river and the fort are protected.

"If recharge happens, that's gravy," Jacobs said.

The Center for Biological Diversity has been a longtime critic of growth and its associated water use in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed.

Harrington said there is no denying Fort Huachuca has done a lot of work in conserving water. She said the fort's work is better than in the civilian communities.

The center goes after the fort because federal law only allows U.S. government agencies to be sued.

"They (fort officials) have done the best work. They have a responsibility to do it and they need to be doing more," she said.

The civilian communities have failed to step up and do equally as important things in conserving water, Harrington said.

The potential of a major multi-million population connecting urban corridors from north to south and in some areas from east to west will cause many environmental problems, she said.

"Ways have to be found to protect natural resources," Harrington said.

The responsibility is to plan for "smart growth plus water savings," she said.

For the Sierra Vista Subwatershed growth means increased water use that will further endanger the river, the center's rivers program director said.

"There is a tide of people coming to the state," she said, adding many of them will settle in Cochise County and they "will overwhelm the river."

Jacobs counters fort, city and county officials are working hard to protect the river and know growth can occur while ensuring the stream continues to flow.

Harrington contends control of individual wells is needed, especially since many exist near the San Pedro River in the county's areas of responsibility. The wells, she said, interfere with water flow to the river.

According to figures she received from the Arizona Department of Water Resources, there are 6,441 wells authorized in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed. Of that number, 5,336 have been installed, of which 3,985 are exempt from monitoring.

"The majority of the (exempt) wells provide water to private homes," Harrington said.

Individuals apply to ADWR to drill a well and the agency reviews the requests to ensure the areas where wells are dug have a 100-year supply of water. The aquifer under the Sierra Vista Subwatershed has sufficient water to support a large population for 2,000 years, according to an ADWR report in March 2005. There are 20 million acre-feet in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed, the report states. An acre-foot consists of nearly 326,000 gallons of water.

But environmentalists say wells are stopping the natural flow of surface water to the San Pedro River because as water is taken out, cones of depression are created, causing rain water to flow into the aquifer instead of the river.

Harrington said control of wildcat subdivisions also is needed.

Jacobs said Arizona is a strong property rights state, which makes it difficult to have legislators change some laws.

Sierra Vista is trying to put the community's population close to the center of the city's infrastructure, she said.

"But there's nothing the city can do to control growth in the county," the assistant city manager said.

Apel said the county is successfully working with developers, such as those who have agreed with developing in the Babocomari Area Plan.

Cochise County supervisors and staff are working with developers in preparing specific plans for the Babocomari area. In one example a Babocomari Development Association was formed representing 18 developers to create an improvement district. The county's Planning Department prefers to work with developers in establishing a subdivision rather than have an unregulated area developed.

In the past, Cochise County Supervisor Pat Call has called the Babocomari Area Plan a new standard for development in the western part of the county.

With so much of the county area without good infrastructure, including paved roads and water and sewer lines, people who are moving to the area and developers know those services are needed, he said. If improvements are to be made by developers, residents will likely bear the cost. There are a number of ways this can be accomplished, including road improvement districts and community facilities districts.

As the area grows there is a need to ensure the infrastructures of the state, cities and county are connected, Apel said.

Jacobs added, "All I can say is we (local governments) have to implement good planning as growth happens."