

Water, transportation require regional approach

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By Richard Werner, guest columnist

What we are all talking about here in Northern Colorado is not the recent rainfall amounts, nor is it the 600,000 straws sucking into our water supply (more on this later). It is the level of growth in all sectors that makes the tide in economic development continue to rise.

The consistent growth in population and employment opportunities across sectors leads us to substantial discussions on how we support the vitality of the region. Our communities are growing exponentially, and the need for infrastructure related to transportation, water and housing all need to be addressed.

Communities are proactively working to incorporate economic-development initiatives across Weld County and the region. Upstate Colorado Economic Development recently launched a new Community Support Program that works to assist the 31 communities in Weld County, as well as implementing the Small Business Revolving Loan Fund and disaster-relief funds across Larimer and Weld counties.

Upstate Economic Development employs a regional approach that is intended to assist communities by acting as the liaison between the companies looking to make location decisions from a market perspective and the structured development perspective of municipalities.

At Upstate, we are excited about supporting the municipal planning goals while facilitating new job creation. It's the process of implementing "business-friendly" as opposed to just stating it in a marketing brochure. Communities have varying levels of economic-development support, and Upstate works with the local reps to augment their programs.

Expediting the development process creates additional jobs and investment in our communities. These public-private partnerships are a practical way to implement the needs of the region through a support network that takes into account the individual needs of a company while relieving some of the burden on the communities.

When we look to augment economic-development efforts, we realize that the region is exceptionally blessed with a wide variety of options to support primary jobs. Collectively, we are much stronger if we continue to actively support infrastructure improvements. There is a tremendous amount of effort being put into workable solutions to our transportation issues, and that is what companies locating to the area want to see. Similar efforts are well-established with regional solutions to our future water needs with projects such as NISP.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project will help augment water storage in the region. With an ever-increasing population, (predicted to double by 2050 in Weld County alone) the project will address the needs that are so critical to our future.

Growing Blue, an advocacy website set up in consultation with The Nature Conservancy, Columbia University, the United Nations and a host of private partners, focuses on the economic impact water plays in our lives. The group noted, "Without water, neither small businesses nor major global industries can function. Not family farms or major agribusinesses. Not energy production facilities or computer manufacturers or steel companies

... Water scarcity means greater risks for a community's long-term viability and a negative impact on their competitiveness. It also means that a community's ability to grow and create jobs is at risk."

NISP has provided the region with options to enhance the region's supply of water, and solutions to the required mitigation that addresses non consumptive use, such as protection and improvement of species and habitat; mitigation of wetlands; addressing and increasing the quality of recreational experiences; and improving watershed health and water quality.

The true flow of water and how we manage it is through a complex process of water rights that requires a cyclical planning process. There are many examples of municipal agreements (IGAs) that address and protect downstream flows. Other water basins in Colorado effectively manage these programs through consensus committees that make appropriate decisions by monitoring on-the-ground conditions.

As we plan for the future, we must remember two main sources of variables in water policy. Hydrology (rain & snowpack) and the necessary calls on water needs by our agricultural partners. When water becomes scarce and levels stop rising, local economies are impacted, jobs are lost, incomes decline, revenues fall, and Northern Colorado suffers. Upstate Colorado leadership continues to work with our regional communities to support their economic-development efforts to further create economic certainty that benefits Weld County and all of Northern Colorado.

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