



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Future growth key in Abeyta water disputes

By J.R. Logan

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In the growing debate over the Abeyta Water Settlement, much of the argument is centered on a single dilemma: How do we prepare for inevitable growth at a time when water supplies are predicted to dwindle?

The dispute is playing out publicly at Taos County, where the chairwoman of the county's water advisory committee, Kay Matthews, resigned after the county commission failed to formally consider protesting a water rights transfer related to the settlement.

At its heart, the Abeyta Settlement seeks to acknowledge the Pueblo's senior right to nearly all of the surface water in the valley while protecting acequias and ensuring that domestic water systems can keep faucets flowing now and in the future.

Matthews and other critics argue the Abeyta Settlement relies too heavily on groundwater pumping that comes at the expense of irrigators' water rights. Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn counters that the community should support the settlement because it balances agricultural needs while providing funding and other resources needed for future development.

Perhaps the biggest point of contention is the proposal in the Abeyta to drill several deep wells to make up for limited surface water supplies. Taos Pueblo negotiator Nelson Cordova recently said a public meeting that the parties "started mixing surface and groundwater into some kind of settlement formula" that would appease everyone at the table.

The resulting agreement is a complex shuffling of water rights, and the addition of several new deep wells to supplement limited water from area rivers.

A hydrologic model prepared for the settlement by the State Engineer was designed to predict how the new wells would impact aquifers and river flows. Based on that model, officials expect the effects to be minimal. They also say pumping can be modified if the effects are worse than expected.

However, critics like Matthews say such models are imprecise at best, and tapping into groundwater should be a last resort. She and others worry that the Abeyta parties agreed to more wells behind closed doors before considering alternatives like conservation and controlled growth.

"We can't look at drought and climate change and pretend we can still use the same amount of water that we've always been using," Matthews said. "If we do, the system's going to fail."

The specter of wanton development in the high desert has been long been a controversial issue in Taos County. In 2010, the previous county commission was considering a threeyear moratorium on subdivisions and other major developments just south of town because of concerns over water. The moratorium became moot when the economy tanked, but the county ordered a hydrologic study of the area to make better informed decisions about keep growth commensurate with the underground water supply.

That report hasn't yet been completed, but co-author Peggy Johnson told *The Taos News* the study area was "literally the most complicated basin-fill aquifer that I've ever seen or imagined."

Abeyta skeptics worry the entire plan is based on an oversimplified hydrologic model.

Commissioner Blankenhorn, who took office in January, agrees with the settlement parties when they say that the agreement is the "blueprint" by which water supplies in the valley can be managed effectively. He has faith in the State Engineer's study and believes the aquifer is more than sufficient to accommodate new residents and businesses. "Nobody's going hog wild," Blankenhorn said. "I find it difficult to believe that the normal course of development in Taos County is going to endanger those supplies in any significant way."

He argues the Abeyta-related water rights transfers proposed thus far do not move water into the county, and are a smart approach to making the most of the county's water resources.

Blankenhorn also notes that domestic water providers like El Prado Water and Sanitation District protect the environment by limiting the number of private wells and controlling the disposal of waste.

In addition, Blankenhorn said protesting Abeyta-related transfers would give the impression that the community did not support the plan, which brings with it substantial financial windfall. About \$150 million from the state and federal governments is slated to be spent on Abeyta-related infrastructure and water rights purchases.