

County reshapes water advisory board

By J.R. Logan

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The committee meant to keep watch over water rights transfers in Taos County has undergone a “transition” that reduced the number of board members and brought in a couple new faces.

The retooling follows months of disharmony between former board members and county commission over whether to oppose water transfers related to the Abeyta Water Settlement.

The Taos County Water Advisory Committee was created in 2010 to review proposed water rights transfers originating in Taos County. Applications to change where and how water is used must be approved by the State Engineer, but notice of such applications is often published in obscurity. The primary purpose of the board was to shed more light on the movement of water rights and offer recommendations to the county commission whether a proposed transfer could affect water users in Taos County.

The water committee is designed to put the language of the “public welfare statement” — an document that describes the importance of water to various local users — into practice. The statement was drafted as part as the development of the Taos Regional Water Plan, which was adopted in 2008.

Since its inception, the original nine-member water committee pushed the previous county commission to protest two controversial water rights applications related to the Abeyta Settlement. One was a collection of several applications filed by El Prado Water and Sanitation District that would move various acequia and well water rights to two yet-to-be- drilled wells near the Taos Regional Airport. The other protest was over an application to move water rights from a Questa acequia to an acequia in El Salto.

But attitudes on the commission have changed since Tom Blankehorn and Gabriel Romero took their seats on the board in January 2013, and recently the commission has had second thoughts about the wisdom of those protests.

Former board chairperson Kay Matthews resigned from the board in protest last October after voicing concerns the commission was not taking the water board’s advice seriously.

Mathews told the commission at an Oct. 1, 2013 meeting she felt the board had been directed to take a “hands-off approach” to any water rights transfers linked to the Abeyta.

But Blankehorn said if the Taos County Commission opposes those transfers, it makes it harder to implement the Abeyta. “It endangers the funding and it endangers 40 years of negotiations between all of these parties,” Blankehorn said, noting that Taos County’s opinion

carries weight with the State Engineer's Office. The apparent falling out between the commission and the advisory board came just a few months before the county chose to change the board's makeup.

County commissioners voted in March to whittle the board down from nine members to five. County staff said the move was needed because the previous volunteer board was often unable to assemble a quorum. The five-member board also makes it possible for each commissioner to appoint a single member based on political boundaries.

This month, the commission reappointed three existing members and named two new members to the committee. "The way I look at it, we need new blood in there," said commissioner Joe Mike Durán at a March 18 meeting. "These [board members] have been there for a long time."

Appointments include: District 1 — Bob Romero (reappointed); District 2 — Albert Micheal; District 3 — Trudy Valerio Healy; District 4 — Glorianna Dom'nguez Atencio; District 5 — Tanya Leherissey.