

Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero punts vote on TVAA split

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At a special meeting of the Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero y Arroyo Seco Saturday (June 23), *parciantes* did not vote on whether to remain a part of the Taos Valley Acequia Association, a decades-old organization that is a major player in the Abeyta Settlement and a model of cooperation for other acequia alliances around New Mexico.

While a vote on the membership to the acequia association (TVAA) was on the meeting's agenda, when it finally came up for a vote toward the end of the two-hour meeting, a motion to leave the organization received no second, and the meeting quickly wrapped up.

Chris Pieper, a commissioner for the Arroyo Seco acequia and a board member to the TVAA, told the crowd of about 60 people they had "accomplished the point of tonight... to discuss our concerns."

The top concern raised throughout the evening was lack of "transparency" from the TVAA, with a number of people criticizing its leaders for pushing for certain aspects of the Abeyta Settlement without explaining to irrigators the full impact of those decisions.

The Abeyta Settlement is a legally binding resolution to Taos-area water rights disputes stretching back decades. Around 1987, Taos Pueblo claimed a right to nearly 8,000 acre-feet of water each year out of the Rio Lucero and Rio Pueblo de Taos. (One acre foot of water is 325,851 gallons.) If the pueblo were to assert its full rights in this arena, it could mean water users downstream, including Seco irrigators and the town of Taos, could be left dry.

The TVAA asked the pueblo to negotiate a deal to avert that scenario, rather than face the uncertainty of lawsuits between the tribe and non-Indian water users. The pueblo agreed, and the deal is now known as the Abeyta Settlement. The settlement was largely finalized in 2013, and now the parties are figuring out how to make the rules on paperwork out in real-life hydrology and engineering.

In 2017, the Arroyo Seco *parciantes* voted overwhelmingly to reject a key proposal in the Abeyta Settlement, called "aquifer storage and recovery," Pieper said. The aquifer storage idea essentially calls for pulling water from the Rio Lucero during the winter, pumping that water deep underground and then pulling it back out of the aquifer during irrigation season to increase the flow of the acequia.

But irrigators thought it would be too expensive and technically cumbersome in the long run. The idea also left people worried about water quality and impacts to their fields.

Palemon Martinez, an architect of the settlement and the chairman of the TVAA since its inception in the late 1980s, said during Saturday's meeting, "It's almost impossible to inform everyone of everything." He thinks there's a group of people who "aren't interested in learning anything...(but are) interested in destroying the settlement," he told *The Taos News* Wednesday (June 27).

Contrary to statements made ahead of the meeting by elected leaders of the Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero y Arroyo Seco, including Pieper, the acequia is current on its TVAA membership dues, which are about \$2,800 a year, according to Judy Torres, TVAA office manager. She said that 29 percent of acequias have not paid their dues for the year for various reasons, with some paying only what they've collected from members and others going into the red because the ditch lacks a commission.

Pieper, who said he has "slipped" in attending TVAA board meetings, also said during a Wednesday interview he hopes the TVAA can listen to people's objections to the Abeyta Settlement and "really (look) at the long-term viability of these projects."

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