



# *La Jicarita News*

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## **Editorial: Taos Regional Water Plan Hijacked by the Powers That Be**

**By Kay Matthews**

We often use the expression "not at the table" to indicate that someone's input was not represented in a process, whether by intention or omission. Well, at the March 7 meeting of the Taos Regional Water Plan, members of the Public Welfare Committee (PWC), who drafted the Public Welfare Statement (PWS) and Implementation Program, were designated the "Stakeholders" and literally were "not at the table": we were consigned to the audience while all the "Decision Makers" were physically there. The Decision Makers, or Taos Region elected officials, included all the municipalities, water districts, and Abeyta adjudication parties who have objected to the Public Welfare Implementation Program because they want to buy and sell water rights on the open market with no oversight.

The meeting was orchestrated by the Interstate Stream Commission and facilitated by Rosemary Romero as the second of two supposed "mediation" sessions to try reach consensus on the plan. But at the first meeting, the Implementation Program was taken "off the table" at the behest of the Decision Makers. Members of the PWC were led to believe that at the subsequent March 7 meeting participants would then work on drafting some kind of language to address implementation.

As a member of the Taos Regional Water Plan steering committee and the PWC, I dropped out of the negotiation process several months ago (the PWC met many times throughout the fall with the Decision Makers and drafted 17 versions of the PWS and Implementation Program to try to make it more inclusive of their

demands) when I saw where we were headed. I believe we were lending undeserved credibility to their complaints by agreeing to changes to a document that had been drafted from the bottom up by stakeholders from around the Taos Region. These stakeholders represented unincorporated communities, environmental organizations, acequias, mutual domestics, and other water users who met for over two years, as volunteers, to draft the plan, and who came to public meetings across the region to help devise critical strategies for the plan, which included keeping water in its area of origin. They supported the creation of an oversight committee to look at all transfers both within and from the region, and based on the public welfare criteria we had developed, including cultural protection, agrarian character, watershed health, and long-term economic development, make an informed recommendation to the Office of the State Engineer as to whether the transfer was in the public interest. Many, if not most, of the Decision Makers, while designated members of the steering committee, seldom attended the Water Plan meetings. Only when we were ready to submit the plan to the ISC for approval did they decide to start attending meetings and object that they had "been left out of the process."

I went to the second mediation meeting to cover it for *La Jicarita News*, and even I was surprised by the blatant maneuvering of the ISC. Romero made it clear that only the Decision Makers were going to address implementation, and Stakeholders were not to participate. When several PWC members objected to the undemocratic way the meeting was being run, they were told that the steering committee and PWC had done their job and were no longer part of the process. It was time for the Decision Makers to draft an implementation component for the plan.

To his credit, County Commissioner Nick Jaramillo (the County is the only Decision Maker that approved the Implementation Program) objected to the process of excluding the committee members. He pointed out that Simeon Herskovits, the member of the PWC who has been responsible for drafting the many versions of the PWS, was unable to attend the previous meeting (committee members had requested that the date of that meeting be changed because of Simeon's absence but were ignored) and was told he would be able to submit some changes, recommended by the PWC, to the PWS. Jaramillo stated that despite this attempt by the municipalities to protect their interests, the County will move forward to do what is best for all its constituents.

The Decision Makers then proceeded to spend the rest of the meeting drafting an implementation program that focused on setting up an "educational and information repository," which is all fine and dandy except that this Taos

Regional Water Plan is not what the public said it wanted. The ISC has made it abundantly clear that it doesn't want implementation as part of the regional plans and doesn't want public welfare to apply to a water management strategy that encourages water transfers from agricultural lands to urban areas. Until growth and development are tied to the availability of a local water supply there will continue to be water transfers. The Taos Regional Water Plan and Public Welfare Statement is our plan to protect our water resources for the benefit of all our region's citizens. Now, without an effective Implementation Program, it can sit on the shelf, along with the other 15 regional plans, and gather dust while water continues to flow both uphill and downhill to money.