

Pipeline plan catches Ark Valley off-guard

By CHRIS WOODKA | cwoodka@chieftain.com | Posted: Friday, July 29, 2011 12:00 am

A proposal to build a pipeline to take water from the Lamar area to Elbert County was met with surprise and skepticism Thursday by valley leaders.

This week, Elbert County commissioners postponed until Aug. 24 a decision whether to allow a small local water district to expand.

The Elbert and Highway 86 Commercial Metro District was created in 2002 to serve residential and commercial needs in the 39-acre Wild Pointe subdivision, and wants to expand its scope to statewide projects, rather than local sources of water. The district relies on nonrenewable groundwater, and proposes bringing in a new source of water through a 150-mile pipeline from the Lamar area.

“It caught me by surprise,” said Henry Schnabel, chairman of the Prowers County commissioners. “I’m encouraged that the Elbert County commissioners aren’t jumping out and making a decision. I hope they are reasoning this issue on some level that can address the impact on the county where the water is being taken.”

Elbert County Commissioner Kurt Schlegel said his board is concerned with what happens in Elbert County.

“We don’t have any say-so with water rights outside of the county,” Schlegel said.

While there is some speculation about whether the water would be used to support a burgeoning oil and gas development industry, Schlegel said the primary use for the water would remain residential and for commercial development in Elbert County based on public presentations.

The Elbert-86 metro district manager, Karl Nyquist, is traveling and could not be reached for comment. A spokeswoman said the district plans to share more details about its plans in the next month.

“We’re looking forward to explaining the details of what we believe is a conscientious project that will benefit communities on both ends of the pipe,” said Michele Ames, district spokeswoman. “That’s why we’ll be holding public meetings soon in both Elbert and Prowers counties in hopes that community members will come, hear about the project and get their questions answered.”

The meetings have not been scheduled.

Nyquist is part of a group that owns water rights on the Lamar Canal. He has appeared several times before the Prowers commission to seek approval for a gravel pit.

“He’s never proposed a pipeline to us. What we were asked to approve was a gravel pit permit,” Schnabel said. “It’s probably a long way off. I hate to see the water leave the area, but they keep coming back.”

Prowers County has seen its share of water transfers in the last 20 years, including attempts by Colorado Interstate Gas to purchase the Fort Lyon Canal; High Plains A&M’s purchase of Fort Lyon water rights, and subsequent sale to Pure Cycle; and the Tri-State Generation & Transmission Association purchase of half of the Amity Canal.

Tri-State’s proposal is the only one that was undertaken to keep the water in the valley, but changed the use of the water to allow it to be used for power generation near Holly in the future.

“I’ve farmed for 45 years under the Amity, and more years than not I failed to make a profit. The water is just worth more coming out of a tap in Aurora,” Schnabel said. “It’s an inequity, and unless they come up with some sort of system to balance the inequities — like better commodity prices — these attempts will continue. The water is more valuable for other things, until people get hungry.”

Prowers County also has land-use regulations under the 1974 HB1041 that govern projects of state interest, such as the proposed pipeline to Elbert County. In the near term, Prowers County needs more information, Schnabel said.

In neighboring Bent County, officials are alarmed, but skeptical of the pipeline proposal.

“It’s a scheme and a scam, and there’s nothing viable about it,” said Bent County Commissioner Bill Long, who is also president of the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District. “If any part of it goes through Bent County, we’ll oppose it.”

Because of water quality, the water would have to be treated. It also would have to be pumped uphill and travel 150 miles — three times as far as the nearly \$1 billion Southern Delivery System pipeline from Pueblo Dam.

If those difficulties could be overcome, the pipeline represents a danger to Bent County as well, because depending on how it is sized, it potentially could transport water from other rights upstream. A great deal of the Pure Cycle land is near Las Animas and is still being farmed because there has been no way to move the water outside the Fort Lyon Canal. Pure Cycle is already appealing its valuations this year, Long said.

Any pipeline into the South Platte River basin also would be opposed by the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District, which last week approved an agreement with Aurora that restricts even studying a pipeline.

“The Lower Ark district’s mission is to protect agricultural water in the Arkansas Valley,” said Jay Winner, general manager of the district. “The

Lower Ark will oppose this project in any way possible because the whole intent of the project is to dry up farmland.”