

THE OPINION OF THE RGJ EDITORIAL BOARD

Merger of county water utility and TMWA will benefit users

Washoe County and the Truckee Meadows Water Authority took an important step this week toward the eventual combination of the area's two primary water suppliers.

An agreement approved by the county commission and the TMWA board on Wednesday will provide the framework for the merger. But the long-discussed deal is not going to happen quickly. *Nothing* that involves water happens quickly in the West, but the main reason for delay is financial: The money people are waiting for a better climate for refinancing the agencies' debt. The transition is expected to continue through 2010.

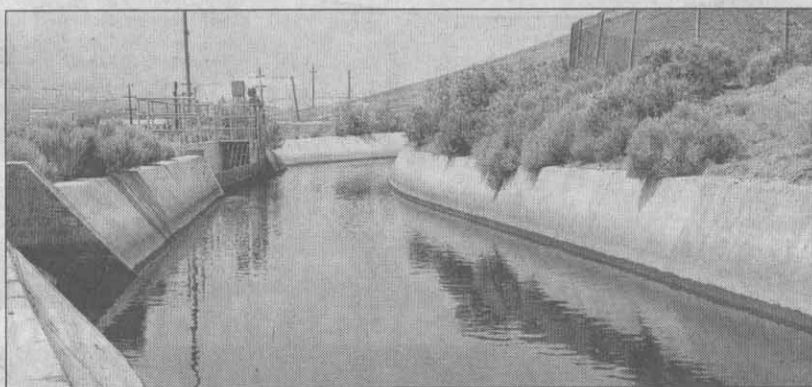
When it does happen, however, it will be a boon for everyone in the Truckee Meadows, with a single, publicly owned entity providing water more efficiently and at a lower cost to all of us. It also will ensure better planning for the future in a region that depends on a precious resource that is in great supply some years and right on the edge in others.

The merger of the two water agencies continues a critical trend in Washoe County.

There has been talk on occasion about the possibility of merging the county and its largest city, Reno, but there are a lot of obstacles to such a combination, not the least of them political.

But leaders in both city and county have continued to look for services that would make sense — and cents — to combine. Fire services were essentially merged through a contract several years ago; animal control was combined when voters approved a tax hike to build a new animal shelter.

Combining the administration of parks has been discussed. (That might prevent disputes such as the one currently involving a citizens' effort



PATRICK CUMMINGS/RGJ FILE

The Truckee Meadows Water Authority has spent a lot of money maintaining the area's water system including repairs to the Highland Ditch, which was damaged in April 2008.

Snapshot

TOPIC: Consolidation

OUR VIEW: The long-discussed plan will cut costs and improve water planning in the region.

to turn the old Northgate golf course into a park to keep it from being developed.) And law enforcement could be the subject of a merger one day, if some very difficult obstacles can be overcome.

The merger of what has become two solid, well run water purveyors into a single entity makes a lot of sense, and the merger has appeared to be inevitable ever since Reno, Sparks and Washoe County agreed to create a public authority to purchase the water utility from the privately owned Sierra Pacific Resources (now NV Energy) nearly a decade ago.

Sierra Pacific then served most of Reno and Sparks, while the county created its own water utility out of several small water companies — often failing — in the rural areas outside of the cities. Sierra Pacific's decision to get out of the water business was a break for residents.

Today, the provision of water is

more complicated than that. While most users in the Reno city limits get their water from TMWA, some get theirs from Washoe County. And where the water comes from can be even more complicated. Depending on the time of year, some users can have Truckee River water coming into their homes some days and from underground wells on others.

Easing the way is the fact that TMWA has made significant improvements to Sierra Pacific's relatively old water system, upgrading the treatment plants and replacing aging mains. The county's system is, for the most part, newer and in pretty good shape. There will be little need to make the large investments in infrastructure that TMWA was forced to make when it took over the system.

Both agencies deserve praise for working together diligently to make this combination a reality. In the long run, it will be a good deal for all of their customers.

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