

## GOT ETHICS?

Our future here in New Mexico will hang on what we do now. Never before in history has it been so obvious we must plan and work hard at meeting the challenge that stares us in the face. Climate change has arrived, and is most likely to be, according to Dr. David Gutzler, Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences at UNM, about twice the effects here as elsewhere. Our snowpacks, which we now depend on for most of our water for use, are likely to disappear in all but the highest ranges. This could mean drastically less water available for us. History does not favor us, as few civilizations have survived that suddenly faced major resource problems. Even when warnings were evident, the inexorable impulse of society snuffing out any recognition that there might be a problem, kept people oblivious until it was too late. Is there anything we can do to give people a chance to save our water and the future?

The Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly, a citizen volunteer group founded to draft a water plan for the region, has been grappling with how to ensure a water supply into the future. A daunting, difficult, task, for sure, but one that attracts a lot of energy, dedication, enthusiasm, hope, optimism, debate, research, inquiry, study, discourse, and of course, lots of argument. We have a Plan, and most of it has been approved by all of the entities that adopt such things. Some of us complain the child has not been so welcomed as hoped in these chambers of local government, but to have come this far is no small accomplishment. This was one endeavor where all disparate entities in the region came together and had it out, for once. Some left, without any water for their ambitions, and some have made it their life's reason for existence. The Plan will not, in itself, solve our water problems, but is a very necessary first step.

Lately, we have been very frustrated by inaction, and negative action, that does not comply with the Plan, and continues a very self-destructive pattern that has marked the rapid urbanization of our region. Whatever we do, it doesn't get much traction. The Plan was written by as diverse a group as could be assembled and had full and open public input. Unfortunately, it has been put on the shelf of local government to keep good company with all the regional plans of the past, the "ignore this" shelf. Why? It's because we have hit a wall in our odyssey to save ourselves from ourselves. What to call this wall could be the subject of a contest, but "ethics" lies just on the other side. Ethics is the ingredient that makes the recipe work, and there's little to buy and transfer. There's such a paucity of recognized ethics out there, we are going to have to find our own.

In truth, most of us retain a good sense of ethics internally. Since we haven't done much public discourse on the subject lately, they aren't so well defined and plugged in, but they are there, healthy and waiting for attention. Ethics are, after all, what is right, and what is wrong, and what doesn't apply to either. The mission of the Middle Rio Grande Water Plan is to "balance use with renewable supply". This is an ethic. Doing otherwise is wrong, and doing so is right. Not leaving a healthy water resource for future generations is wrong, and leaving them the gift of clean and sufficient water will get us into heaven, if there is one. That was easy, right? Well, the story of humanity is we don't often go beyond what's easy. And, doing the right thing is very scary and threatening to a lot of people. Those that are scared of not making a lot of money are the most terrified and most likely to act out on their fears, snuffing out any recognition there is a problem. The politicians, terrified of not receiving campaign funds from those terrified, endlessly offer the non-ethic of growth as our salvation. Most of us are busy and don't pay attention, and the water resource bears further abuse.

Someday soon, we won't be too busy to pay attention, maybe all our attention, to the problem of sustainable water resource management, as it will be for all resources. The ethic will be one of devoted stewardship. Stewardship has two sides. A resource must be nurtured. And, restraint towards it must be shown. Nurturing is instinctual, and lots of water resource nurturing

is going on. New Mexicans are uniquely blessed that there are people here whose ancestors were taking care of the water thousands of years ago and we have the distillation of just as many thousands of years of water management throughout western civilization's history in our acequias. We don't have to reinvent the wheel, only to look to and understand the priceless wisdom of our inheritance as New Mexicans to learn how to take care of our water.

Restraint is more difficult to realize from ethics. We usually look to the law for restraint. Many find restraint a virtue in their faith. But restraint that comes from within and from the self, and is part of stewardship, well, that is nearly a lost art. To quote economic philosopher John McClaughry, there is "a need for some limiting principle, to enable a society at some point to legitimately say 'enough!'" These principles exist and are well employed in New Mexico, we only need to find them and use them when making decisions over our water. We have to develop a sense of right and wrong over water use, and not only be concerned with whether we use it or not. We need to develop a better regard for each other, and realize we all depend on each other, so we can take care of our world, together. In the future, economics will not enter into water resource stewardship. We will do it as we breathe air, grateful there is water to take care of, and air to breathe. New Mexicans have always prided themselves in the ability to make comfortable lives out of little. We are the richer for it. If we do what is right for the water, perhaps we will win back some of the lost grace and serenity New Mexicans used to possess in abundance.