

Arizona scrutinizing water replenishment district proposal

More water would be available, cost higher

By Peter Blais

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Creation of a Phoenix-area ground water replenishment district designed to more fairly allocate water and make more of the precious liquid available is being considered by the Arizona state Legislature.

Funding the district's activities could eventually cost the average golf course an additional \$250,000 within 10 years. But Arizona golf industry officials doubt the figure will go that high and favor the proposal as long as everyone shares the financial burden.

"If everyone shares equally in the funding, we have no problem with lending the bill our support," said Ed Gowan, executive director of the Arizona Golf Association, who believes the legislature will create the district within the next year.

As proposed, the replenishment district would be phased in over 15 years. Everyone withdrawing ground water would be required to join. Gowan estimates the plan would affect 50 percent of the area's courses.

The graduated tax would rise from \$10 to \$100 per acre foot for 10 years. The tax and other assessments would translate into an additional \$5,000 annual cost to the average golf course the first year, Gowan estimated. The money would finance such projects as construction of reclaimed water treatment plants and installation of pipelines to bring effluent to golf courses.

Finding new water sources would be encouraged while the practice of buying water rights from rural areas for use in urban areas would no longer be allowed.

Golf industry officials have reservations with the act, which they believe will be modified as the bill works its way through various legislative committees.

Their primary concern is that the proposed bill taxes only current ground water users, who comprise about 60 percent of the facilities in the Phoenix Active Management Area. But it doesn't affect surface-water users or future developers who will use ground water. As Gowan explained, an existing course using ground water could end up paying for acquisition of the water used by a competitor who eventually opens a course a few miles down the road.

"The concept of water replenishment made good sense, but the burden should not be borne exclusively by current ground water users. It should be shared with those benefiting from the plan," wrote Arizona Golf Association President Bill Rodie.

"Price is a serious consideration with several courses at the brink of bankruptcy. A further tax burden supporting the existence of their future competitors seems unfair."

Since new developments would

be among the major beneficiaries of the plan, Rodie's association supports a stipulation similar to the

city of Scottsdale's requiring an advance fee for access to water.

Most golf industry officials favor



Ed Gowan

a replenishment district because it will help make more water available and provide funds to get it where it is needed. And there is plenty of water available to handle expected growth well into the 21st century, according to Gowan. The problem is getting it to where it is needed.

For example, in the western Phoenix suburb of Buckeye, the water table is so close to the surface and so much ground water available, that much of it must simply be pumped into a dry river

bed, Gowan said. More importantly, 80 percent of Arizona's effluent water is not being used, he added.

In Phoenix alone, 65,000 acre-feet per year of effluent, enough to irrigate more than 100 golf courses, are released into the usually dry Salt River basin, according to Cactus and Pine GCSA President Jerry Zidow. Almost an equal amount is being wasted in Tucson, Zidow added.

"The problem is, it isn't being piped to where it is needed," Zidow

said.

Taxes levied by the replenishment district could help pay for those pipelines, Zidow said.

"And five years into the project there would likely be enough new water lines and new water available that it wouldn't be necessary for taxes to go much higher," said Gowan, explaining why he feels the levy would never reach the \$250,000-per-course level. "If it is set up properly, the replenishment district could handle all the area's future growth."

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