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San Antonio: Innovative, Creative, Environmentally Conscious. And Still Running Out of Water.

To understand the legendary culture of water conservation that this city has cultivated in the last 20 years, consider that an 11-foot tall model of a low-flow toilet adorns the lobby of its water utility's headquarters. The toilet recently was the subject of many photo opportunities when a group of more than 80 lawmakers, legislative staffers and water planners toured San Antonio's water facilities.

"We've got cities coming from all over the world," Greg Flores, the spokesman for San Antonio Water System, or SAWS, told the visitors over a home-cooked brisket lunch. Later, the group gawked at the utility's underground reservoir storage system, drank treated wastewater from its award-winning water recycling plant and learned of plans for a desalination plant. The message was clear: The state's thirsty cities should follow San Antonio's lead.

Yet even with recent accolades from federal officials and a featured role in a public television documentary, San Antonio is grappling with explosive growth and dwindling water resources, just like rest of Texas. The city has long hunted for a new source of water beyond the inexpensive and clean Edwards Aquifer, which it has depended on for decades. But critics say that pursuit is happening at the expense of more rural communities. And they also fear it endangers San Antonio's reputation as a "green" city that has been able to successfully balance growth and water conservation.

"We have to go outside the Edwards," said Amy Hardberger, an assistant professor at St. Mary's University in San Antonio who teaches water law and land use. "But how we do it and how much we do it means everything."

San Antonio's aggressive conservation efforts started in the early 1990s, when a federal judge ordered the city to pump less water from the Edwards Aquifer to protect endangered species. Ever since, attempts to secure new sources of water have had limited success. More than half of the 80 billion gallons of water SAWS delivered to 1.7 million consumers last year came from the Edwards, of which San Antonio is by far the biggest user, but that will probably be curtailed this year because of drought conditions and to protect the endangered animals who depend on the aquifer's springs.

Overtures to buy groundwater from underneath rural South Texas counties have led to fears that the city will drain those aquifers. The utility says that is not its intention, but points out that if San Antonio does not get those water supplies, another city will.

Other regional water authorities that have pursued joint water projects with San Antonio have felt rebuffed. Ever since the utility backed out of a collaboration with the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority in 2005, the two entities have fought constantly over water supplies in various river basins in South-Central Texas. "It's the same as Lucy yanking the football away when Charlie Brown tries to kick it. We always feel that we are Charlie Brown," an official at the river authority, Todd Votteler, said.

Even some legislators have said that San Antonio has insisted too aggressively that they relax local

groundwater regulations, which would ease their attempts to buy water from other counties.

“When San Antonio comes into the room, there’s definitely a reaction that I’ve noticed: ‘Who loses on this deal for the benefit of San Antonio?’” said state Rep. Lyle Larson, R-San Antonio. “We’ve got to change that reputation. It’s created some regional confrontations.”

Both Larson and Flores say that the utility’s president, former state Rep. Robert Puente, has helped foster a more diplomatic approach since he was appointed in 2008.

Last month, yet another search for water supplies appeared to have failed. After more than three years of evaluating multiple proposals from the private sector to make the biggest addition to San Antonio’s water supply in history — 16 billion gallons a year — Puente appeared to throw up his hands and abandon the endeavor. All the projects were too risky because local opponents could cut off the supply, he said.

While environmental advocates applauded the decision, the business community was appalled. “It was a very surprising and disappointing announcement,” said City Councilman Joe Krier, former president of The Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. Krier said businesses constantly ask him, “Are you going to have enough water for me 20 years from now? And we can’t give them an answer.”

Under pressure, Puente agreed to reconsider a proposal to pipe water from underneath rural lands northeast of Austin. But he also said the project would cost the utility \$2.6 billion over 30 years and could require a 12 percent increase in water rates in just a single year. That would not be an easy sell in a region whose water rates have jumped more than 50 percent in the last decade. A large chunk of those increases are paying for \$1 billion in sewer improvements after leaky pipes spilled more than 20 million gallons of raw sewage from 2006 to 2012, prompting the federal government to sue SAWS.

Such a large contract could also discourage conservation, environmental groups have pointed out, because the utility must pay for all the water whether residents use it or not. By contrast, the utility will own and operate the desalination plant it is currently building, which will treat water from a nearby salty aquifer, so it could cut production if demand lessens, saving costs.

A debate also still persists as to how much San Antonio has conserved, and how much new water it will need. Puente has championed the fact that from 1984 to 2009, water use decreased despite huge population growth. But data from the time frame of 1988 to 2013 shows consumption by ratepayers went up 24 percent, in part because SAWS absorbed a large new customer base in 2012.

The utility also serves sprawling areas outside city limits, where it has no say on how new developments are planned. Planners say that new homes are much more likely to include automatic irrigation systems, which can significantly increase water use. The city has long used off-duty police officers to build up one of the most robust enforcement programs of lawn-watering restrictions in the country, but that can only go so far.

But most believe that no matter what the city does to quench its thirst, decades of conservation habits will continue to be an emphasis.

“You’ve got to recognize that as the price of water goes up — and it will go up, because it is a scarce resource — that’s going to encourage more conservation,” said Reed Williams, a member of the SAWS board.

And it is indeed the water utility that prizes such a culture above everyone else. When Larson called

El Paso the state's best water conserver at a recent water law conference, Puente, sitting right next to him, could not help but whisper audibly, "second only to San Antonio."

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