

Looking for water? Look ahead

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You can't do without water, and in Colorado you can't get water without paying for it. Those two facts are behind Fort Morgan's strong advocacy for the Northern Integrated Supply Project, a large reservoir project in which the city is one of 15 participants.

NISP is needed, city officials say, and it's hard to argue against that. It's also hard to argue against increasing city water rates and tap fees to pay for it.

The idea is for new growth to pay for new water supplies, and that is the direction the city hopes to move. But there's no denying the price of water is going up and will continue to go up, and its availability is going down and will continue to go down.

So it's not surprising that current customers are going to have to pay a little more, too.

The city of Fort Morgan was farsighted in getting involved in the Colorado-Big Thompson water project, and that has paid off in a big way. Not only has the quality of domestic water improved dramatically over the well water residents used in the past, but that well water has also become severely restricted by augmentation requirements.

If the city had not gotten involved in C-BT years ago, Fort Morgan residents would be in a real pickle today.

The same thing applies to NISP. As city Utilities Director Gary Dreessen has said repeatedly in recent months, if we don't get our water from NISP, where are we going to get it?

That's a very good question, and there really is no answer — except maybe “nowhere.” And that simply is not an acceptable answer. A city of some 12,000 people can't simply ignore the prospect of running out of water and hope something comes along to bail it out. That's not going to happen.

So Fort Morgan officials are to be applauded for once again having the foresight to get involved in a long-range water project that will ensure a secure, safe and reliable supply of good-quality water for the city.

A total of 15 municipalities, other government entities and water districts are involved in NISP, and Morgan County is fortunate that both Fort Morgan and the Morgan County Quality Water District are among them. No one else can join unless one of these entities withdraws, which seems less likely every day. They all know they've got a good thing going.

If the NISP project and the consortium behind it were to fall apart, Dreessen notes that any number of thirsty Front Range suburbs would dearly love to get their hands on the very same water.

NISP is a good deal on many levels. The cost of the water may seem high, but it's the going rate and in a decade or two is likely to look like a real bargain. And unlike C-BT water supplies, the city will get every drop of the 3,600 acre-feet it is buying in for, not just a percentage based on quotas.

Also unlike C-BT, any NISP water that is unused in a given year can be carried over and stored in the NISP reservoirs, allowing the city to keep more than a three-year supply of owned water at today's usage levels in reserve for drought years.

NISP won't even start construction until 2011, won't be finished before 2015 and may not fill for several years after that. So it may seem like a far-off, pie-in-the-sky idea today. But you can bet that by the time NISP water starts flowing toward Fort Morgan, we'll need it, we'll be glad we have it, and we'll have our forward-thinking city officials to thank for it.