

## The Salt Lake Tribune

# Priming growth: Questionable pipeline should be on ballot

### Tribune Editorial

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The Lake Powell pipeline: a savior for St. George's growth-based economy, a demon to enable more ugly sprawl, or a mirage that will vanish as climate change dries up the Colorado River and the mountain snowpack that feeds it?

The 66-inch-diameter pipeline would carry 80,000 acre-feet of water 158 miles to Washington and Kane counties and 20,000 acre-feet 38 miles farther to Iron County. Its eventual cost is unknown; the state and Washington County water officials estimate \$842 million, while pipeline opponents say it could run closer to \$2 billion, counting all its bells and whistles.

This massive and massively expensive project should be put to a vote of the people in Washington, Iron and Kane counties, many of whom do not believe it's prudent or necessary, or on a statewide ballot. And, even if approved by voters, the state should require the three counties to first adopt strict water conservation measures to see if they can't forgo the costly project.

There are at least two ways to view the pipeline: Some say the good news is that it could double the amount of water available in Washington County and enable hundreds of thousands of new residents to move to this fragile desert community.

For other people, that's the bad news.

Builders and Realtors depend on growth for their livelihood. Families and retirees who live in Washington County now would like to see some limits on sprawl and the ugliness, pollution, traffic, crime and crowds that it inevitably brings.

In fact, Washington County would have to keep growing its population in order to pay for the pipeline, regardless of the negative impact on the fragile environment, since funds to repay the state's investment would come from impact fees on new construction.

There is also the probability of future water shortages brought on by climate changes and an already expanded population. Washington County has added 60,000 residents in the past decade, pushing its population above 150,000. Some scientists predict Washington County will run dry in just six years, at current usage.

The operative phrase in that sentence is *current usage*. If cooler heads prevail to put the pipeline on hold, as they should, county water officials have Plan B: desalinating and pumping groundwater. But why not make tougher conservation measures Plan A?

Washington County residents use about 327 gallons per capita per day, while Las Vegas use about 230 gallons, and Tucson and Albuquerque residents less than 150 gallons per day. This overuse has got to stop. Everyone has a duty not to waste a drop of the dwindling supply.

Conserving now, and placing reasonable limits on unbridled growth, is the common sense alternative to high-stakes gambling on a pipeline built on the mirage of a bounteous, never-ending supply.

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