Democracy in an era of water scarcity

My View

After college, I worked for an international non-governmental organization addressing negative economic, social and environmental impacts of large-scale water projects, such as dams and channelization schemes. We worked in collaboration with NGOs around the world.

Moab City Councilor Rani Derasary.

File photo

A huge challenge for local communities was, and remains, an inability to have a say in what happens to the water
resources they depend on.

This is often due to authoritarian — but sometimes democratic — governments working with large funders like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund to advance projects that forcibly “resettle” large numbers of people, promising to maintain their standard of living, and to provide water or power.

Time and again, this has proven a false promise. People forced from their homes are thrown into poverty, currencies are devalued, economies undermined; ecosystems people depended on for livelihoods, such as fisheries, are destroyed; and promised water or power is often never delivered.

Central to our work was fighting for local people’s rights to have a voice about their community’s water resources, making sure there was democratic public participation. My colleagues were engineers, economists, journalists, academics, scientists, linguists and policy experts.

I mention this to offer insight into my concerns about how water discussions at the City of Moab are occurring. Protecting water resources was part of my election platform in 2015 and 2019.

I’ve been taught that water is in the public trust; that a
central responsibility of cities is to deliver culinary water; that elected officials such as city councilors should play a role in decision-making about water; and that, to do this well, elected officials should be as informed as possible on policy, technical and legal aspects, history and data — garnering these from a combination of staff and scientists, academics and residents knowledgeable about the local watershed.

I’m writing to tell you that my ability to make informed water decisions is being hindered by a decrease in the engagement and education of councilors, and to invite you to be part of the solution.

Since January 2022:

Promised meetings educating councilors on water scarcity have not come to fruition, despite continuous pleas for them in public meetings, emails and conversations.

Meetings related to the Water Utility Resource Management Plan (WURMP — intended to guide our valley’s “resilient water resource management for the next 100 years”) have not been public, save one online meeting.

The city’s Water Conservation and Drought Management Advisory Board (WAB) — a volunteer citizen advisory group created in 2016 to inform the city council of policies and practices to ensure quality water supply for current and
future residents — has effectively been disbanded.

Repeated requests to have scientists and academics such as Dr. Tom Lachmar, whom many of you heard at the Jan. 23 Moab Area Watershed Partnership (MAWP) meeting, present to the council have been met with dismissal, and the sentiment that “the city has all the water expertise it needs in the city manager and city engineer.” I say this not to disparage those individuals, who certainly bring expertise to the table, but so you know of this consistent resistance.

The April 25 city water workshop was attributed to my meeting requests, though I was neither consulted in its content planning nor scheduling. I say that not to be petty, but to demonstrate that councilors are not at the table.

Conflicting reports come to me about key officials’ engagement with Moab Area Watershed Project, from: “we’re actively engaged” to “we’re not interested in attending,” or lack of awareness of what MAWP does. For the record, it is a collaboration of diverse stakeholders sharing knowledge and developing and facilitating implementation of a holistic watershed plan, which conserves and enhances water quality and quantity in the Mill and Castle Creek watersheds and their tributaries.

At the Feb. 21 Grand County Commission meeting, Utah Division of Water Rights Regional Engineer Marc Stilson
explained it is the community’s responsibility, not the state’s, to avoid getting into a situation where we’re mining our aquifers.

I ask, how can today’s Moab City Council look residents in the eye and tell you we’re doing everything possible to protect and make informed decisions about your watershed if we can’t have regular conversations about water, or hear from the locals most familiar with our watershed? I consider this issue too important for the council not to be investing more time in it.

Please join me in calling for these patterns to change. People around the world face prison and sometimes assassination for discussing their community’s water resources. We’re fortunate in this valley to still have the right to demand it is openly discussed in ours.

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