

Regional water panel, Austin at odds over proposed budget

By STERRY BUTCHER

MARFA - The group responsible for planning the region's water management got a glimmer of good news this week after a month-long period of worry about state funding.

The Far West Texas Water Planning Group is a state-mandated panel, one of 16 in Texas, that has spent the last several years crafting a plan of how to deal with the next 50 years of water management. The region pairs the most rural territory in the state with the water stricken city of El Paso and thus, the purview of the group's planning is inherently enormous, complex and difficult.

In 2002, the group swung into its second phase of planning, a five year block of time in which they are to accomplish tasks as varied as refining projections on population and demand, reviewing surface and groundwater sources and the identification, evaluation and selection of management strategies based on need. In December, the group received word that the Texas Water Development Board (WDB) had proposed a \$337,865 budget for the whole of the five-year planning cycle, a figure that group members viewed as woefully inadequate.

The planning group's history includes no small amount of rancor among the representatives of the urban and rural interests, but the

tumult of those days seemed long gone in the face of the funding crisis. In late December, Chair Tom Beard, of Alpine and Vice-Chair Ed Archuleta, of El Paso's water utility, traveled to the WDB offices in Austin in order to hand deliver a sheaf of protest letters from group members.


Last Thursday, the group gathered in Marfa for their regular monthly meeting, where Beard told members of their reception from Craig Pederson, the WDB executive director. "He was very understanding of our issues and our plight," he said. "Ed Archuleta and I were very encouraged by it."

Group members spent much of their time in Marfa projecting and assigning various sums to each of the 10 large tasks in second planning cycle's scope of work. The group's final estimated figure for the project came to \$1.053 million, a far sight more than the \$337,865 assessed by the WDB.

Edd Fifer, a group alternate, addressed the perceived shortfall and aimed his remarks at Sherry Cordry, WDB liaison who was present at the Marfa meeting. "By starving this region, they're going to reduce the quality of the product," he told Cordry. "I feel like the work we're doing is something the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission and the WDB should be doing on their own. We've already learned how to deal with the smallest quantity of water. We've fought drouth all our lives and now you're making us fight a drouth of money. Craig Pederson (of the WDB) needs to understand that they're starving us down."

One purpose of the group's re-evaluation of budget requirements in Marfa was to prepare for an Austin meeting a few days later, at which WDB personnel and water planners re-visited budget issues. Beard took his group's new figures with him to the Austin meeting Monday.

"It became apparent that they were going to have to pacify the



troops and put down the rebellion," Beard said later this week. "There was a presentation that explained the guidelines they used and the preliminary budgets."

Though some of the regional planning groups were okay with the proposed budget the WDB had allocated, others, like the Far West Texas panel, were mightily dissatisfied. "There's just not enough money to do the job they say we have to do," Beard said. "This is a very capital intensive deal. The less populated areas such as ours got short-changed because the budgets were determined by the number of water user groups. We don't have that many water user groups because we don't have that many cities."

Carla Daws, a public information officer for the WDB, helped explain the budget decisions this week. "The funding formula was based on 11 separate tasks," she said. "Five of the 11 had specific costs assigned to it that were equal across the board. The other six tasks were larger dollar items and they were based on the number of water user groups. This was more a function of size."

The result of Monday's Austin meeting is that WDB is now in the midst of re-looking at the budget allocations. "We've still just got \$12 million to work with, with about \$6 million in reserve costs," Daws said. "We may wind up biting in to that reserve to raise the \$12 million base. The budget numbers will be changing, based on the input of that meeting. They aren't etched in stone."