

What San Antonio should learn from Melbourne

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In the face of climate change, we can best protect our water future by preparing to live with drought as the new normal. The key is to make the most of every drop of rainfall.

San Antonio just made it through one of the worst droughts in Texas history. Climate change means we'll have more — unpredictably longer and more intense. Is San Antonio prepared? Nope. And the San Antonio Water System is leading us the wrong direction.

Express-News staff writer Brendan Gibbons' recent front-page article about summer water consumption between 2011 and 2015 gives clues about why. Drought preparedness requires real conservation — ongoing commitment to keeping all the water we have, and guarding our aquifers and their recharge zones.

How well did San Antonians do?

First, the good news. Average residential water use dropped so dramatically that overall water use — including industrial and commercial — fell from 143 to 121 gallons per person per day. That's several million gallons saved each day.

Now the bad news: During the drought, San Antonio's heaviest water users actually increased their consumption. The thirstiest 100 households upped their usage by 50 percent between 2013

and 2014 alone: from 73.8 million to more than 112 million gallons. Profligate consumers apparently share several characteristics: considerable wealth, posh homes with large lawns and automatic irrigation systems, and willingness to squander precious water even when the aquifer is threatened.

Why weren't Stage 3 and 4 watering restrictions imposed in 2014, when the Edwards Aquifer Authority ordered 35 percent and 40 percent pumping cuts? Because SAWS claimed it had acquired so much non-Edwards water that its customers shouldn't have to reduce usage. That's the reverse of drought preparedness.

At the same time, SAWS was campaigning for City Council approval of the Vista Ridge pipeline deal — a huge, expensive pipeline to draw billions of gallons from a distant aquifer. Not because we need it but to supply a projected additional million residents — each presumably consuming far more water than needed.

Whoa! How's that fair? Why should ordinary residents, many with household incomes well below the national median, have to pay for a pipeline to enable wealthier suburbanites to waste water? SAWS' biggest water users clearly don't believe we are all in this together.

Why allow that kind of new development? With low impact development — water- and energy-efficient homes and businesses — San Antonio will attract those who choose sustainable living. Not “water-abundant,” as SAWS claims, but “water-savvy” as a way of life.

Our recent historic drought lasted only five years. What if it had lasted eight more years with no sign of ending? In the face of climate change, we can best protect our water future by preparing to live with drought as the new normal. The key is to make the most of every drop of rainfall in our watershed.

We can take inspiration from the example of Melbourne, Australia, during its 13-year “Big Dry.” According to a 2015 San Francisco Chronicle article (“Drought survival: What Australia's changes can teach California”), Melbourne residents reduced water usage to 40 gallons per person each day and kept it low after drought ended. They invested in rainwater tanks, gray water recycling and water-efficient appliances. The city expanded water supply with large-scale stormwater capture. Not needed yet, their new desalination facility is reassuring backup. Melbourne's successes are due to the widespread sense that “we're all in this together,” combined with a “can-do” approach to innovation and conservation.

San Antonio residents, too, can pull together to prepare the whole city to make it through the inevitable droughts (and floods) ahead. Let's find a sense of unity in protecting our shared water resources.

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