

Utilities' Bostrom pushes, drags SDS project to success

April 30, 2009

**R. SCOTT RAPPOLD
THE GAZETTE**

Gary Bostrom has been shouted down at public meetings. He has been accused of wanting to drown towns in the mountains and dry up towns on the plains. He has seen his ideas ravaged by a crusading newspaper.

"I've been called a few names," Bostrom acknowledged.

It's an occupational hazard when you're the chief water planner for Colorado Springs Utilities, a job that has taken him all over the state, as the city has looked for water to supply a burgeoning population and ways to bring the water it owns here.

The name-calling days appear to be over.

After 20 years of planning, including eight years of negotiations and legal wrangling with Pueblo, Utilities on received a permit on April 21 from Pueblo County to build the Southern Delivery System, a \$1.1 billion pipeline from Pueblo Reservoir meant to quench Colorado Springs' thirst through 2046.

It was the last major hurdle for the project, and afterward, officials from Pueblo County and Colorado Springs smiled, shook hands and posed for photos, a détente that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

For the 52-year-old Bostrom, it was the payoff of a career-spanning effort.

No other Utilities official has worked so long on the project.

"Gary has kind of been the behind-the-scenes guy whose resolve has kept things moving forward, even though there have been some stumbling blocks in between," said El Paso County Commissioner Sallie Clark, a former Colorado Springs councilwoman who helped forge a key 2004 agreement with Pueblo, under which that city agreed not to oppose SDS.

Bostrom recently talked about the long search for a new water source for Colorado Springs - and how a water engineer and the organization learned to listen to the communities and people in the path of their grand designs.

"I've learned a lot about public speaking and public perception," Bostrom said. "From the mid-'90s on, it was almost more about presenting the plan than developing the plan."

Bostrom, who grew up in Colorado Springs, traces his interest in the water system to February 1978, when, on a Pikes Peak hike, he drank water from a mountain stream. He developed

typhoid fever, spent two weeks in a hospital and nearly died. It inspired him to apply for a job the next year with the water department.

Bostrom worked on the 1986 purchases of the Colorado Canal and lakes Henry and Meredith in southeastern Colorado. He also worked on the water court filings that allowed the city to use them as exchanges, taking water up the Arkansas River and releasing it from those reservoirs, so the overall quantity in the river is not diminished.

He was also involved in the ill-fated Homestake II project, when Colorado Springs sought to divert water from the Sawatch Mountains, a wildly unpopular idea among locals and environmentalists. In 1988, Eagle County denied a permit, a decision later upheld by the Colorado Supreme Court.

"That was a very hard time. We were not able to do what we thought was best and (decided) we better start paying attention to other stakeholders and communities as we move forward," he said.

In 1992, Bostrom became a water department manager and the city's top water planner.

He spent several years whittling down the city's options for new water.

An alternative for a new reservoir on the Arkansas River north of Buena Vista proved to be as unpopular as Homestake II and was dropped.

A pipeline from lakes Henry and Meredith was nixed for water-quality reasons.

Gradually, Utilities zeroed in on building a pipeline from Pueblo Reservoir. Colorado Springs owns the rights to that water, due to its exchanges, participation in the federal Fryingpan-Arkansas Project and other water rights it has acquired in the Upper Arkansas Basin throughout several decades.

But eyebrows were raised in Pueblo over Colorado Springs taking more water, no matter who owned it. Pueblo had long blamed Colorado Springs for flooding, erosion and water-quality issues on Fountain Creek, and that city worried SDS would lower Arkansas River levels and imperil a planned kayak park. Pueblo County adopted regulations specifically for SDS, which Colorado Springs unsuccessfully challenged in court.

A water war seemed inevitable, given this history; lingering resentment in Pueblo regarding the fact that it had been Colorado's second city but was left in the dust by Colorado Springs' growth; vitriolic editorials in the Pueblo Chieftain newspaper; and a lack of communication between elected officials from both cities.

But Bostrom and other utility staffers in both communities never stopped talking, which paved the way for the city councils to start talking in 2003.

"He's a person that has always tried to look for benefits that can benefit both parties, in a discussion and a negotiation," said Alan Hamel, director of the Pueblo Board of Water Works. "We were able to always maintain a professional relationship and work on the issues, the technical aspects of a complex project like Southern Delivery."

"He's an easy-to-work-with person, and I think he has established himself among the various interests who have had to work on this as a collaborator and a cooperator, while still providing the strength that's needed to keep the project moving forward," said Clark, who led the effort to get an intergovernmental accord, under which Utilities agreed to certain flows in the Arkansas and Pueblo dropped opposition to SDS.

Utilities hired a full-time SDS project manager in 2007, as Bostrom took on broader planning duties, though he remained heavily involved, attending meetings and hearings and lending his expertise.

SDS will be the most expensive project in Utilities' history, but Colorado Springs has also agreed to \$125 million in concessions - for wastewater and water-reuse projects and Fountain Creek improvements - to mitigate the impacts of sending more treated effluent downstream.

Bostrom has enjoyed the work, even if it's been more public relations than engineering.

"I think it fits my personality. I love the engineering aspect of the work, but I think I enjoy the relationships-building side of it even more," he said.

These days, he oversees planning for several departments, including water. He has no plans to retire.

After all, his name in Swedish means "one who dwells near the river."

"There has to be a diversion in it," he joked.