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OPINION // COMMENTARY

McKenzie: Texas needs to think long term about water

Sen. Charles Perry sets a Bullock-esque example.

By **William McKenzie**, *Contributing Columnist*

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A spring fed by the Glen Rose formation of the Trinity Aquifer. Contributing columnist William McKenzie writes that Texas leaders need to take the long view when it comes to water planning and funding.

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State Sen. Charles Perry gets my nod for the best reincarnation of Bob Bullock. The now-deceased Bullock was lieutenant governor under both Ann Richards and George W. Bush in the 1990s. Along with his ever-present proclamation of “God Bless Texas,” the bigger-than-life and, let’s just say, colorful leader was known to bark during policy debates, “What’s best for Texas?”

That question particularly applied to the state’s ability — and willingness — to develop long-term water supplies. Before being elected lieutenant governor in 1990, Bullock had served in and been involved with state government going back to the 1950s. He had seen water plans come and go.

So, as head of the Texas Senate in 1997, Bullock championed and Bush signed a measure that created a way

for local communities to identify their water needs over a 50-year period. As a result, every five years the state combines those local projects into an updated [statewide plan](#) for the next five decades.

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Here's where [Perry, a Lubbock Republican, enters the equation](#). He chairs the Senate Committee on Water, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs. Like Bullock, the Lubbock legislator is urging policymakers and voters alike to think about what's best for Texas' long-term water needs.

During a recent appearance before the Dallas Friday Group, Perry reminded the audience that North Texas particularly has benefited from forward-thinking leaders who created numerous reservoirs in the middle decades of the 20th century. Those lakes have been a primary supplier of water for this region's economy and its now more than 8 million residents.

Going forward, the three-term state senator said, we need people who once again think beyond the moment. He worries that we are caught up with short-term thinking, which will not allow Texas to meet its water needs.

So far, this year's race for governor is not helping matters. Democratic gubernatorial nominee Gina Hinojosa wants to take [\\$17 billion from the state's surplus](#) to send \$1,500 checks to Texas households. That may help families in the short-term, but it will dry up funds for long-term investments for water supplies.

Gov. Greg Abbott's re-election ads propose a measure that would require a two-thirds vote of affected citizens for any property tax increase. That also may sound enticing in the short term, but it will make it harder to raise local funds for water projects. And the governor's proposal to eliminate school property taxes and replace them with money from the state budget likewise would squeeze out money for water investments.

To be clear here: Perry is by no means Mr. Tax. During his tenures in both the Texas House and Senate, the accountant voted for every legislative measure to lower property taxes with the state making up for lost revenue.

What he does want is a sensible conversation about the type of projects Texas needs.

“We need to get normalcy back into infrastructure conversations,” the matter-of-fact lawmaker said during a recent interview. He also thinks a hunger exists across the state for conversations about the future.

A recent Texas 2036 poll backs him up. The survey found that 79% of Texans believe it is extremely or very important to prioritize investing in water supplies that will ensure long-term economic growth or reduce the risk that communities run short.

Those results are encouraging because doing big things takes money. That’s why Perry pushed through a measure in the 2025 Legislature to provide \$1 billion annually for state-approved water projects for the next 20 years.

To his credit, Abbott supported that spending plan. But more money will be needed. The draft of Texas’ 2027 version of the 50-year water plan outlines \$174 billion in investments.

To get the state through just 2050, the 2027 plan calls for 34.1% of our water coming from lakes and rivers; 17.5% from groundwater sources (aquifers); 15% from water reuse; and 4.8% from seawater desalination. It also relies upon getting 28.7% from municipal and agricultural conservation.

Many of these projects won't come for free. They require state and local investments, along with some federal dollars.

Communities will find it hard to finance their share of projects if lawmakers limit their ability to raise local property taxes. Institutions that float bonds, which is the primary way local governments raise capital for infrastructure projects, look to local taxing authorities to back them up. They are unlikely to issue the bonds if a community lacks a tax base to support them.

Fortunately, not all our water demands require money. Texas 2036 recently released a report examining how the long-term water plans for Corpus Christi and surrounding counties missed that the city could go dry, which it nearly did earlier this year. The report recommends, among other things, that the state review data used to make projections, such as assumptions about droughts, and classify projects by their urgency.

Still, the state has needs that require money. The easy thing will be to satisfy ourselves today. The difficult part will be thinking about tomorrow and beyond.

Like Bob Bullock, Charles Perry is looking ahead. We should press other lawmakers to join him.

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