

The Salt Lake Tribune

Don't soak Utahns

Published: September 24, 2011 01:01AM

Updated: September 24, 2011 01:01AM

The Legislature should close the floodgate on any scheme to finance the Lake Powell Pipeline with state funds. Utah can't afford the pipeline in the current weak economy, the water for the project may become unavailable due to climate change, and other state demands must have higher priority, beginning with education and transportation.

Besides, Utahns living in the two most populous Wasatch Front counties — Salt Lake and Utah — already are carrying a considerable property-tax burden to complete the Central Utah Project. In addition, the folks in Wasatch, Duchesne, Uintah, Juab, Sanpete, Piute and part of Garfield counties also pay property taxes to the Central Utah Water Conservancy District. The rest of the state does not. The completion of the CUP is proceeding without funding from the state government.

While it is true that the federal government has been putting some \$40 million annually toward completion of the CUP, which conveys water from the Colorado River basin to the Wasatch Front, that money is a loan which will be repaid by Utah taxpayers in the water district which benefits from it.

But beyond all of that, Utah simply cannot afford to be the banker for the Lake Powell Pipeline, which would convey water some 139 miles from Lake Powell across Kane County to Washington and Iron counties. As Utah Treasurer Richard Ellis told the Legislature the other day, Utah is at its bonding capacity and should not take on more debt if it wishes to maintain its AAA bond rating and the low interest rates that come with it.

What's more, the climate change models for the waters of the overallocated Colorado River do not bode well. If the available water in the river declines, it won't be there to pipe to St. George at any price. Under these conditions, a conservative people, as Utahns see themselves, would not bet on moving that water through an expensive pipeline system to water the golf courses of St. George on the edge of the Mojave Desert.

Water conservation is a much cheaper alternative. True, it would mean a radical lifestyle change in St. George, where people would have to adapt their lifestyle and landscaping to the desert climate in which they live. But it also would be sustainable.

Any scheme to earmark growth in Utah sales tax revenues or to impose a separate tax to finance the \$1.1 billion Lake Powell Pipeline should be abandoned. It makes neither financial nor environmental sense.

© 2011 The Salt Lake Tribune