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Lake Powell pipe

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The water conservancy district in central Iron County has released its plan to build and pay for its portion of the Lake Powell Pipeline. It is based on the notion that, "If we build it, you will come, and when you get here, you will pay for it."

The plan assumes that new arrivals, be they residents or businesses, will create the demand for water that makes the Lake Powell Pipeline necessary. So, beginning shortly, if you put up a new house, you will pay an impact fee of \$3,000. That fee will rise by another \$1,000 every five years, so that folks who build in 2070 will pay a fee of \$15,000.

We wonder, though, what happens if the \$1.5 billion pipeline is built with a loan from the state, and population growth does not happen quickly enough to generate the impact fees to pay off the debt. That may sound like a crazy question, given the explosive population growth in southern Utah in recent years, but no one knows how long the current housing slump will last. That could affect growth in Iron County and repayment schedules for the proposed pipeline.

The two biggest questions about the pipeline are whether the communities of St. George and Cedar City can afford to pipe water all the way from Lake Powell and whether, given global climate change, the water will be available in the Colorado River. We have our doubts on both counts.

The pipeline would bring the water from Lake Powell through northern Arizona, into Kane County, and on to Washington and Iron counties, a distance of about 200 miles in all. It would supply 13,249 acre-feet of water to Iron County annually, though water officials want to increase that to 20,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is roughly enough to supply a household for a year.

The report pegs basic construction costs at \$1.2 billion. (Other reports place it at \$1.5 billion-\$1.8 billion. For comparison, the rebuilding of I-15 in Utah County is in the same price range, about \$1.7 billion.) Iron County's portion of that lower estimate would be about \$367 million. The central water district will have to spend an additional \$51 million on new systems to utilize and distribute the Lake Powell water. Operation and maintenance costs will come on top of that.

We're wondering how a county with a population of only 46,000 will pay for such a project, especially if its population does not grow to 151,000 by 2060, as the governor's office projects, or 240,000, as water managers predict. Consultants averaged those two growth rates when they put together the capital facilities plan.

Project sponsors expect the state government to finance this project. We think that makes no financial sense.

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