

Pipeline? Pay up!

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Ron Thompson, Washington County's water manager, makes the assertion that his county deserves a pipeline because northern Utah got the Central Utah Project. ("Thompson: St. George deserves a pipeline," Opinion, July 14.)

However, the circumstances, need and ability to pay for the Lake Powell Pipeline are totally different.

First of all, no one geographic area is entitled to anything unless and until those who will have to pay for such a project — taxpayers — give their consent. We have not been consulted.

The CUP got considerable money from the federal government. There is no federal or state money available for the current project.

When the water in the Colorado River was divided up in 1920, those who signed the agreement presumed they had the right to do so and left out some important elements, including Native Americans, for instance.

Then tiny Nevada got only a tiny share because the Silver State was not well-represented. And, of course, California got the lion's share because it diverted so much more water than it needed in the beginning. All in all, a most unequal and unfair agreement.

Theoretically, under the Colorado River Compact each state should have shared equally in available water. Now, Thompson says Utah is entitled to its full share, even though the tribes still haven't been treated fairly and Nevada gets only a small part and needs more.

We haven't even talked about Mexico yet. We forgot them until they reminded us they were using water long before we were. We then gave them a small share that is now polluted and often doesn't arrive.

To say that we're entitled is entirely unreasonable. Utah uses water from its own watersheds that would otherwise run into the Colorado. To propose a 140-mile, 66-inch pipeline — at a cost somewhere between \$3 billion and \$6 billion — to serve an area of desert with a relatively small population, borders on crazy.

How could it be paid for, as both the state and federal governments say they will not pay? How could 150,000 people, only one-third of them taxpayers, pay for this? State law requires the county to pay off the pipeline within 50 years.

Do the math. At \$3 billion (construction cost, plus interest), the pipeline would require a yearly payment of at least \$120 million for 50 years. And that doesn't include the annual cost of operation and maintenance, estimated to be in the range of \$10 million to \$20 million.

This yearly cost exceeds what is currently spent to maintain both the Washington County and St. George City governments.

If there was ever a bad and unaffordable idea, this one is the granddaddy of them all.

It means that the portion of property taxes to support water must go up dramatically. The cost of water itself must go up. Impact fees must increase. And surcharges, as allowed by statute, will make up the difference.

It all adds up to a lot of taxes. What happened to this conservative county and the "no more taxes" mantra? Thompson needs to stick to developing water within the county, which, in fact, he has done pretty well.

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