San Buenaventura: De-Hydrated Destination (Nov 30, 2018)

*by Bob Chianese*

San Buenaventura or “Ventura” has become a favored destination for Angelinos and others. Areas inland from the coast have become hotter nearly year-round, and traffic makes longer treks for heat-relief untenable, so our city has been “discovered” by the rest of the region. This has spawned moderate upgrades in our cafes and restaurants, our shops and craft beer hang outs, and has generated festivals for all sorts of year-round celebrations, beach and ocean themed or not.

However on weekdays Main Street can be nearly empty of cars and people. Turnovers of merchants expose some of our problems--primarily it’s too expensive to rent retail space in downtown or buy a home here and settle in for more than a short term holiday. City government and the Chamber of Commerce try to rectify this by accelerated building, with only marginal success and with strong resistance from locals. Why? The infill projects now approved and under construction seem much too crowded and tightly packed. I doubt that tourists from LA want to move into very costly, over-built developments, such as the one being completed at the harbor.

But of course the Thomas fire blow-torched through here last December 2017 and burned our hills for miles and reduced over 600 houses to rubble. For those not effected, the place still seems like a gem with its balmy breezes, cozy beaches and lazy afternoons. We hear people still say that this is the great place to live, a “find,” and too bad for those who did not realize that sooner—or who lost out in our firestorm disaster.

However, our new fires this November 2018 might discourage more folks from relocating here. We’ve seen the face of climate change and it’s a wrinkled sunburnt blistered mess. Will it turn tourists away too? We’ll see how short their memories are.

There’s one serious drawback—we are soon out of water. The Ventura and Santa Clara Rivers are trickles, our Lake Casitas is at 31% capacity; these may come up temporarily. Our aquifers are being drawn down so deep it’s impossible to measure how much water is left. And that is thousands of years-old water, almost impossible to replenish.

Furthermore, there is little steady rain in sight. Despite hope-driven predictions, weather watchers’ dances, and sheepish confidence that things will return to normal, there is little consistent rain now or in the offing. Climate disturbance has shifted air and water currents, thinned the Sierra snow pack and made its melt earlier and quicker. Prolonged drought has dried up the ground so much that even irrigation evaporates too quickly. Winters are shorter, hotter summers much longer. And when it does rain now, we often get what just blew through here--a potentially destructive deluge, the ground crusty, un-rooted, soot-coated, and vulnerable to slides.

We deliberately did not connect to the state water project, and who can count on that source these days? When these human-caused droughts dry up the whole western region, despite denialists and contrarians, our fair city is very vulnerable. We could run out.

Ventura’s attempt to regulate water consumption depends on a rate system with five “tiers” of usage costing increasing dollars. This simply means you can water all you want if you are willing to pay for it, a tax not a restriction.

Agriculture uses 80% of the water in the state, and big ag businesses are willing to pay thousands a year to keep the crops growing, often with three harvests per year in our sun-rich Mediterranean environment. They still make a profit—despite the costs. You may scorn this, but what would our region do without agriculture? What might replace it, even after heroic strategies to reduce water needs?

We are conserving, trying to reduce our urban landscaping needs, our baseline household gallonage, our water footprint, and we do have a gray water reclamation plant. But without significant year after year rain, conservation itself cannot replace our historical overuse. And none of the rates, taxes, or fines, of course, produces one new drop of water. What’s a city to do?

We need to generate water in two if not three ways: Connect to the state supply, provide for de-sal, and then, perhaps, radically, implement multi-stage purification of wastewater. Not interested? Whadya gonna do when the well runs dry?

With possible sudden rains up north and the requirement to release dammed water to preserve flood control capacity, connecting to state water could be very beneficial to us. But can the state water infrastructure handle this onrush of water? Who knows? And will those rains come and be steady? That’s a hope, but we may have to bank on it.

Desalination is another key source. It’s expensive— as much as two or three times the cost of ground water per month, about twice what we pay now. It’s environmentally damaging to the ocean because of the effluent’s high salt and debris content, but we need it. We can use solar-generated electricity to power the pumps and the reverse osmosis filters and add to our local water supply. ([www.advisian.com/en-us/global-perspectives/the-cost-of-desalination](http://www.advisian.com/en-us/global-perspectives/the-cost-of-desalination).)

The real water producer would be “toilet to tap” reclaimed waste water. This is repulsive to the squeamish, but thousands in Orange County already have this reclaimed water blended into ground water. The big OC reclamation “factory” produces 100 million gallons a day, enough for 850,000 residents. It costs the same or less than imported water and is more reliable. It’s one-third the cost of ocean desalinization.

Our problem, according to local water expert Dan Cormode, is the amount of total dissolved solids (TDS) already in our ground water supply that would increase if we employed indirect re-use of reclaimed water. Toilet to tap reclaimed waste water if pumped into the Mound aquifer and blended and pumped out, would result in a very high TDS. This would give us more water, but of lower quality and more costly. However, a climate-changed world with prolonged droughts in the west might require no less.

Our chronic water shortage is here to stay. Our recent deluges are somewhat welcome, just so they don’t get more powerful and wash away the hills. What we need is a return to pre-climate change conditions, with steady, soaking, substantial, year-after-year rain.

Depending on that could be our downfall as a community.

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