

Sierra Club Candidate Questionnaire 2004
Santa Fe County Commission Election
Name: **Thomas Blog** District Number **2**

GENERAL

1. What are your environmental achievements, experience and affiliations as a government official or as a private citizen?

I have studied nuclear weapons proliferation for 25 years. My affiliations are as a member and donor to the Federation of American Scientist and Bulletin of Atomic Scientist. I am also a subscriber to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Non-Proliferation Project.

In the only government position I have held, I was dismissed for raising environmental questions. I served on the Planning Commission for the Village of Glen Ellyn (Chicago suburbs). The mayor granted 6 projects exemptions to newly strengthened Army Corp of Engineers wetlands regulations. After studying Corp documents, I asked in open forum on what basis these projects had been exempted. Within 2 days, I was dismissed from the Planning Commission. Efforts to convince the Corp to overturn the exemptions were unsuccessful.

As a local citizen I have helped to organize opposition to PNM placing a high pressure gas pipeline through the La Tierra / Horcado area to serve Pojoaque's upcoming resort. Faced with community opposition and legal threats, PNM has stopped the project and is looking for another route.

As a local citizen, I have helped to organize opposition to BLM granting Zany Garcia and Bill Burk a new road through BLM land near La Tierra. This road would enable Zany and Ortiz to develop over 1000 acres. BLM has not yet made a decision. Additionally, we attempted (unsuccessfully) to convince BLM to use some existing excellent research to declare the Buckman area to be an area of environmental concern.

As local citizens, my wife and I purchased a Honda Hybrid last year. This car is both fuel efficient and extremely low emission. This brings our 'family fleet' average to 30 mpg.

Finally, as a parent I work hard to teach my children appreciation for the environment, including a "creature no kill" policy (we just relocated the first rattler of the year), recycling, trash busting and water conservation.

2. What do you consider are the most important environmental issues facing the citizens of Santa Fe County?

People and growth. Details are throughout this document. Two additional issues for me are dark sky and trash.

WATER.

One of the challenges faced by New Mexico is the rapid drawdown on our underground aquifers. The Office of the State Engineer would like to be able to control the rate of drawdown in critical basins.

3. In particular, new wells in these basins would be metered and the allocation on a new domestic well would be less than the current 3 acre-feet per year. Do you support this effort? What do you think is an equitable allocation?

I completely support this effort. Our well is metered and I have been logging my water use yearly. Since installation in 2/95, we (a family of 4) have used 370,000 gallons. This is 118 gallons per day, about 30 gallons a person or .13 acre feet per year.

I feel an equitable allocation is not more than .25 acre feet, with a goal of .2 acre feet and with sub-limits on potable water use for landscaping.

4. A legislative proposal in the last session would allow the State Engineer to deny new domestic well permits in these critical management areas. Would you support this proposal?

Not as proposed. I don't think a complete ban (unless time limited or tied to upcoming 'real' regional water) would ever pass or be fair. It would prevent people from living on their land. However, I would support severe land/water use restrictions, such as no subdivision, no potable water use for landscaping, wellshare, etc. in these critical areas.

5. What is the county's current plan to obtain water for growth? Do you propose changes to that plan?

The County has no plan, only hopes. The 40 Year Water Plan, as published and revised, is testimonial to what little has been accomplished over 10 years. Going back, I found a 1990 plan that called for the Chama Diversion project to be online by 2000. Now its proposed for 2008. Maybe.

In the short term, the County should implement as ordinances both the details of the 40 Year Water Plan and the County Growth Management Plan.

The County must start now with strong conservation and education programs. As the County water system come online, the pricing structure of the water should reflect the actual cost as well as have penalties and incentives to induce reasonable use.

Additionally, the County must cooperate with the City and develop a regional water plan and implement a Regional Water Authority, at least in the Santa Fe area. Ideally, this entity would be elected and be separate from both City and County governments, have the power to tax and bond and look at the big water picture. There is plenty of evidence that water, sanitation and other utilities can span political boundaries for a greater common good.

6. Do you support limits on new developments unless the developers obtain surface water rights? If your answer is yes, what constraints do you propose to avoid unleashing a speculative water rights market that undermines traditional acequia systems?

Yes. No development should be approved unless the developer has adjudicated, in-basin water rights. That is the closest we can come to 'real' water. Surface water is critical because is renewable and manageable in less than geological time.

The problem developers face is not a lack of water rights. The rights exist (both ground and surface), but are considered "too expensive." Hence, developers are trying to transfer water rights from Socorro. Paying market price for in-basin water would reflect actual value.

The acequia systems are being undermined for many reasons: Aamodt, children not wanting to continue the family tradition, use it or loose it water use requirements, competition from larger farms, etc. Their water rights may be the single largest asset they hold and they are entitled to get a good return for it (or continue to farm).

The price of water would go up, developers would have to pay 'market rate', and the cost of development would go up, serving as a constraint (just a bit).

I prefer a regional water system (based on real conjunctive use, not just mining the aquifer) rather than wells at each development. The developer could be required to provide in-basin surface water rights to the regional system.

7. Plans exist for a new development named Suerte del Sur in District 2 with a water supply from a new deep well. Nearby neighborhood associations fear that the well may negatively impact their existing wells. What is your position on the development?

Disclosure: I am on the steering committee and have made a contribution to the Santa Fe Well Users Association which is opposing this well.

My objections are ones of process: Lack of County transparency, lack of County policy debate on the developer's "buy in" of a well and its potential influence on land use decisions. I believe the County is in a panic to make up the 500 acre feet held hostage to the one year wheeling agreement extension, and is desperately trying to find any source of water.

The local hydrology is unclear but not good. There are 200+ domestic wells within a mile of the proposed development. There is anecdotal evidence throughout the basin that deep wells lower the water table (Buckman, Osage, NW Well, etc.). The developer and County are completely begging the question about impairment to nearby domestic wells ("Take it up with the State Engineer").

This type of 'trade' has not been openly debated, is not in the 40 Water Plan, and as implemented is bad public policy.

8. Do you think the county should study other water treatment alternatives such as treatment of effluent to drinking water standards, or treatment/importation of brackish water?

Yes. But per question #6, the costs should fall predominately on new development. Success with these alternatives will enable growth, which at some level benefits us all, but the major direct benefits will accrue to the developer.

9. Would you favor seeking to pipe in potable or brackish water from the Estancia area in lieu of the \$160 million San Juan Chama Project?

I am in favor of considering all options: From cloud seeding to repairing leaking pipes to increasing conservation!

Sustainable growth must involve surface water. Regardless of the size of the basin aquifers, there is no question that we are taking water faster than they are being recharged. On a regional basis, we should focus on the Chama Project (and Santa Fe reservoirs) first.

Both County and City governments are terrified to take funding questions on any growth enabling water projects to the voters.

TRANSPORTATION

On a typical summer day there are 180,000 cars, including commuter and tourist vehicles, in downtown Santa Fe.

10. Would you support a rail connection between Eldorado and Santa Fe?

It depends on the cost and number of people served. If it is point to point bulk movement (Like Park & Ride to Los Alamos), it might work. If it is discretionary movement there may not be enough people to justify it. Worth looking at, though.

11. Should the county have a role in supporting the city bus system?

Yes. Some of the closer in portions of the County (College District, Agua Fria, Airport Road, etc.) are already served by the system.

Does this question ask about expanding bus service into the County, say along the 285 corridor to Tesuque and Pojoaque? I don't know at what point you get the density needed to justify bus public transportation (even subsidized). As an occasional user of larger city public transportation, the frequency of a bus/train/subway ride is as important as the proximity to the destination. I would rather serve a route well, than poorly serve an area.

11b Given that many of the county roads are narrow (and picturesque), would you support either of the following policies to increase bicycle safety on these roads:

- i. Improving shoulders for bicycles and/or***
- ii. Developing and enforcing policies to encourage bicyclists and motorists to share the roads (traffic calming, lower speeds, education about sharing the road, etc.);***

Yes to both. I biked for pleasure and to and from work in Chicago. I also biked to and from UNM as a student. After a couple of near death experience in Casa Solana and on La Tierra, I have stopped riding. Marked (and occasionally cleaned) shoulders, as well as driver and biker education are needed for safer riding.

Bikers should also share the County trail system. If the trail surface is compacted or has base coarse (like the old railroad beds used in Chicago), they can be ridden with any type of bike.

OPEN SPACE/TRAILS

12. If you favor a plan to connect new and existing trails throughout Santa Fe County, how do you propose to implement such a plan?

Connected trails are great. Trails are the sidewalks of the County. If there are enough of them, they won't become overburdened like some of the mountain trails. Trails should be encouraged across the public lands (often now very near developments). New and existing developments should be given credits for permitting trails through or around their periphery.

In addition, connecting trails should be encouraged off road but in the right of way (often much bigger than the road itself), for example along the 599 frontage road where the pipeline is currently being laid.

13. Would you support preserving and purchasing land, or at least transferring development rights, to protect open space?

Yes. I support Open Space bonds. The money has been well spent. It is also a fair model: the citizens voted for it, paid for it, get to use it, and it benefits all residents. It should be an ongoing bond resolution, as previous land purchase bonds get paid down.

Transfer of development rights is more complex, and subject to manipulation if not closely watched. It can be a lower cost way to insure public open space, though.

The County should work with State and Federal agencies to insure public land remains public – there is a lot of BLM, Forest Service and State land in the County that may come under pressure.

SPRAWL

14. What is your position on growth in the county? Do you think that the county is dealing effectively with new growth?

Growth is not inherently bad. Planned well, disclosed and debated, it can even be healthy. I favor such growth. After all, the developers are building in response to real demand. However, the approval, planning and cost (economic and social) sharing processes must be improved.

I feel that County has improved in the last few years, but still has a very long way to go before I would say it is dealing effectively with new growth (or the needs of existing residents).

15. Do you support the implementation of the Highway Corridor Ordinance (HCO)? More specifically, would you oppose the granting of a variance in a case such as the county is facing where a structure has been built in violation of the ordinance?

I completely support the HCO.

In general, if a structure is built in violation of ordinance, it must be removed or the violation mitigated (at the violator's expense). To grant a retroactive variance for an illegal building sets a bad precedent and is a violation of public trust.

If what I have heard about the barn is true (that a permit for two smaller structures was incorrectly issued re the HCO, but the owner did not even comply with that permit and simply built one larger structure), the County should enforce the HCO compel its removal.

16. What is your position on the County's Growth Management Plan that directs growth to clustered sites in the county, as a means of preserving open space and making more cost effective use of infrastructure?

I think the Growth Management Plan is a great start. It was written with a lot of good citizen and staff input. Unfortunately, like the 40 Year Water Plan, the Commission never turned the key points and objectives into ordinances. For example, the GMP calls for 10 acre lots in the Rural Area, yet Suerte de Sur is proposed with mostly 1-5 acre lots.

The GMP calls for clustered sites. This is a good way to efficiently use infrastructure. Open space (or sparsely/large lot developed), spanned by public trails would preserve the rural nature.

17. What is your view of the role of the Regional Planning Authority in guiding growth in the five mile area around the city of Santa Fe? Should regional water planning be part of the RPA's jurisdiction?

The RPA has great possibilities. It has gotten off track due to personalities and the inability of the elected members to compromise and see the big (5 mile) picture. There is very much an “us v. them” mentality on the RPA. As a result, the RPA doesn’t have much to show for itself. This could be due to of the makeup of the RPA: the County members are elected by City and County voters, the City members only by the City voters, and the decisions affect mostly the County areas. The need for an RPA is real, but the implementation should be improved.

Currently, water is specifically excluded from the RPA’s purview. This was done for the same reason that prevents regional planning. Given the current structure and track record, I do not believe water planning should be added the RPA charter. I believe a separately elected Regional Water Authority should handle water planning and implementation in this area.

18. What is your position on development impact fees to pay for the incremental costs of new roads, schools and other infrastructure?

I strongly favor impact fees. As you may have noticed from my other replies, I have a background in engineering and economics. I like the price mechanism. While governments benefit from development (property & sales tax increases), there is an initial direct infrastructure cost increase.

Impact fees, fairly calculated and applied to the services impacted is a good policy. It is the one place to capture the incremental cost of new development. Many other municipalities have impact or recapture fees.

The key point is that fees be fairly administered and go back to improve the services impacted. Impact fees that go to ‘general revenue’ become corrupted and are unfair to the developer or impacted residents.

19. Do you think there should be a limit on growth in Santa Fe County? If so, how should that limit be determined and enforced?

I don't believe there should be a legislated hard limit to growth in the County. This would result in one of two extreme and undesirable outcomes: All but the wealthy are priced out, or the collapse of investment and value.

However, unless the County improves transparency, public debate, land use and water policy, the County (and city, for that matter), will soon hit many de-facto limits to growth: cost of living, quality of life and diversity.

20. Some have proposed the consolidation of city and county government in Santa Fe. What impacts would you envision this might have on water and land use management?

I would not support such a consolidation. I don't think the voters in either the County or the City would support it either. Consider the County has about 135,000 people and a budget of \$93 million – the City has about 67,000 people and a budget of \$210 million.

Accountable (i.e. elected) regional planning is good policy, but bigger is not always better. A regional water board and a better functioning RPA would be a great improvement, yet leave local issues to the locally focused and responsible officials.

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