Economic lifeblood: Panel explores connections between water and business

Water plays a key role in the Grand Valley, whether it’s irrigating crops, attracting tourists or, in the case of local wineries, both. The Colorado and Gunnison rivers also help to make the area unique. (Photo courtesy Visit Grand Junction)

Phil Castle, The Business Times

Water plays an essential role in the Grand Valley economy whether its used for irrigation, recreation or, in the case of recruiting businesses to the area, attraction.

“Water is the lifeblood of our state and our community,” says Kristi Pollard, executive director of the Grand Junction Economic Partnership economic development organization.

Pollard was among five members of a panel who discussed the connections between water and business during an annual event in Grand Junction exploring issues related to water and the Colorado River.

The panelists encouraged efforts to not only conserve water in an arid region, but also take advantage of the scenic beauty and recreational activities associated with rivers to further promote economic development.

“The rivers are an asset that really makes us unique,” Pollard says.

The panel also included David Miller, a senior vice president who leads environmental and conservation initiatives at Alpine Bank; Sarah Shrader, co-owner of Bonsai Design and founder of the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of the Grand Valley; Bruce Talbott, a fruit grower in...
Palisade; and Sam Williams, general manager of Powderhorn Mountain Resort. Tom Kleinschnitz, owner of Adventure Bound Rafting, moderated the discussion.

The panelists discussed various ways in which businesses use water — from irrigating peaches, wine grapes and other crops to making artificial snow at ski resorts. Without water for farms or ski areas, important components of the economy would suffer, they said.

The ski industry is concerned not only about the prospect of global warming, Williams says, but also global drying.

Shrader says beetle infestations in forests are not only an insect problem, but also a drought problem.

Other businesses depend on businesses that depend on water. With locations throughout Western Colorado, Alpine Bank serves businesses and individuals whose operations and lives require water, Miller says.

As part of its conservation and environmental initiatives, Alpine Bank has reduced water use 40 percent, Miller says. That’s important, he says, because more water is drawn from the Colorado River each year than is replenished by rain and melting snow, a difference that ultimately could have serious ramifications for the region.

At the same time, though, reduced water use also saves Alpine Bank about $12,000 a year, he says.

Talbott says his family uses sprinkler systems and other more efficient irrigation techniques to not only conserve water, but also hedge against the risk less water could become available.

While farms might hold senior rights that give them a priority to use available water, it could be problematic to limit drinking water supplies during a drought, Talbott says. “Cities aren’t going to go dry as agriculture gets water.”

Pollard says the cost and availability of water are among the factors businesses take into account in considering whether to open or relocate operations.

At the same time, though, water also is needed to sustain existing businesses, including those in the agricultural industry, Pollard says.

That makes efforts to conserve water important, Pollard says. “We live in the arid west. It is not abundant.”

Businesses can play a proactive role, she says — installing landscaping that uses less water, for example.
In the Grand Valley, though, the Colorado and Gunnison rivers and lifestyles associated with them also constitute an important part of business recruitment efforts, she says. “The rivers are a huge part of our brand.”

Shrader says even more should be done to develop amenities along the rivers in the Grand Valley and promote them. “We really need to focus on celebrating the rivers.”

Williams agrees. “We’re not maximizing the use of the river from a commercial perspective.”

Other communities that have been successful in diversifying their economies beyond a single legacy industry started with riverfront development, Shrader and Williams says.

Bonsai Design — a company that designs, builds and installs adventure courses and ziplines around the world — plans to open a new facility that would serve as the anchor tenant of a business park proposed for a location near Los Colonias Park along the Colorado River. Bonsai Design expects to invest $2 million in new facilities at the site, including a research and development facility that will include a zip line and challenge courses open to the public.

Shrader says she’s excited about the potential for local efforts to change the tone and culture of the Grand Valley. “This community is poised to do something really fantastic.”

Pollard says the continued development of Los Colonias Park will help in bringing more people to the riverfront and increasing awareness of that amenity.

Pollard also says she’s encouraged by other riverfront development efforts in Fruita and Palisade. “The good news is we’re all trying to pull in the same direction.”

Williams says a more collaborative approach to develop a common vision of what the Grand Valley can become would be helpful.

But ultimately, it all depends on water, he says. “If we don’t have good, quality water, all that goes away.”

About Phil Castle
Website: http://www.thebusinesstimes.com
Phil Castle is editor of the Grand Valley Business Times, a twice-monthly business journal published in Grand Junction. Castle brings to his duties nearly 30 years of experience in editorial management positions with Western Colorado newspapers. In addition, his free-lance work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the Washington Post. He holds a bachelor’s degree in technical journalism from Colorado State University.