

# Communication Versus Confrontation – “Together, We Thrive!”

**A**t the time in late January when this article is being written, there are no new bills in the Kansas Legislature that address the much talked about, and often contentious, territorial issues between rural water districts and cities. One bill, HB 2283, remains in conference committee from the 2009 Session; KRWA supported the legislation in the '09 Session. The bill is the result of a KRWA legislative committee that met in late 2008 to evaluate what improvements might be made to encourage communication rather than confrontation. KRWA circulated its draft to other stakeholder organizations, including the League of Municipalities in early December 2008. The original bill, SB 332, was called for hearing on March 9, 2009. That was done absent of any request or encouragement by KRWA. Regardless of the twists and turns that the legislation took late in the '09 Session, the bill is an improvement in that it requires more notice and cooperation regarding and annexation and sets out those factors that both cities and RWDs should consider and evaluate in a proposed annexation of RWD territory. By the time this article is in print, the Legislature will likely have taken action on it.

KRWA has worked for many years to provide education and information and technical assistance to help local water districts and cities work out territorial agreements. If you were to review the pages of print and the number of training

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seminars that have been produced or sponsored by KRWA that address this topic, I think you will find that effort pales what any other similar state association or organization has done. KRWA has always suggested that local communities, cities and RWDs, need to communicate to discuss service plans for territories, particularly those adjacent to growing metropolitan borders. HB 2283 was amended several times, and it is imperfect as is the case

with any legislation, but it accomplishes much for water systems in Kansas.

Recently, in concert with the south-central Kansas Rural Economic Area Partnership ([www.reap-ks.org](http://www.reap-ks.org)), KRWA has provided leadership in developing a paper entitled “Guidelines for Annexation of Rural Water District Territory.” The goal of the guideline is to provide a basis or checklist for both cities and rural water districts to consider, before they hire attorneys and begin to harden their opinions and positions. Such activity only ends in what might be characterized as mutual destruction – with the only apparent winners being the attorneys.

## Leadership in demand

This subject of the need for cities and RWDs to better communicate about territorial concerns begs local officials to be open-minded and objective. Each community or rural water district has its own set of peculiarities, given the physical nature of the systems, the cultures and other dynamics that may be involved, least of which are political. Local leadership – and objective leadership – is in great demand so that local systems concentrate on the potential options to serve customers or applicants in the most reasonable and responsible manner. Doing so requires a constructive dialogue between project representatives.

Local city councils and rural water boards of directors should not just be about water systems. Sure, a governing body of a city or RWD must responsibly defend the integrity of their entity, but they must also see their responsibility to their “community”. Councils and boards are a fundamental part of democratic governance. Their role is to provide

## Guidelines For Annexation Of Rural Water District Territory

The 2010 KRWA conference will feature two breakout sessions with the purpose of discussing and providing the new “Guidelines For Annexation Of Rural Water District Territory.” At the time of this writing in late-January, the document was in draft format. The guideline will provide a background on the formation of rural water districts, a background on conflicts in service area, suggestions on how to prevent conflict between water service providers and possibly, an example “territorial agreement.”

strategic leadership. That requires the promotion of programs and efforts for the well-being of citizens by acting on local and regional challenges that are shared.

What can your city or RWD do to create a strong, thriving community? First, I think it is important to build the capacity of local governance. To that extent KRWA has worked to create one of the most unique board/council training programs in the nation. That training is difficult to deliver – primarily because many board/council members determine early they do not need training. And as in most cases, those who need it most are the least likely to attend. But my suggestion to that segment is, “Attend, but don’t attend with the intent to be ‘trained’. Attend with the intent to share what you know. That way, everyone else will learn something.”



We must all work together to meet the challenges of our fast-changing world. Local leadership will only be effective if it involves partnerships with other communities, stakeholder organizations, agencies and others. Effective partnerships are the result.

### Together We Thrive!

I encourage readers to attend the 2010 KRWA conference. The conference theme was developed around the paragraphs that you have read to get to this point. “Together We Thrive.” Let’s get beyond the “go it alone” approach. People in cities and RWDs in Kansas deserve to have the most reliable and cost effective service. Locally elected boards and councils have a moral and fiduciary obligation to work to ensure the citizens receive such service. We all must work together in partnership to provide quality service for the long-term viability of our communities and rural Kansas. Together, we thrive!

*Dennis Schwartz is the current President of KRWA and is a member of the Kansas Water Authority. He has been General Manager of Shawnee RWD 8 since 1976. Dennis has also been a director for National Rural Water since 1992, a member of the Water Industry Coordinating Council from 1996-2002 and EPA’s National Drinking Water Advisory Council from 1999-2005.*



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