

WATER WARS

You may have heard recently about “Water Wars,” which is the catchphrase used to describe the lawsuit filed by the South Carolina Attorney General regarding the use of water in the Catawba/Wateree basin. The lawsuit, which pits South Carolina against our larger neighbor to the north, is currently being considered by the US Supreme Court. At first glance, it is simple enough: it asks that North Carolina not be allowed to deprive us of South Carolina’s fair share of the water which flows down our shared river, the Catawba.

But, as is so often the case, things are not as simple as that. Indeed, digging a little deeper into the lawsuit, and into the details as they pertain to Lancaster County especially, shows that things are a lot more complex. For example:

A key element of the lawsuit is South Carolina’s request to restrict “interbasin transfers” (“IBTs”), or moving water out of the Catawba basin and into the Yadkin/Pee-Dee basin. This is important because, once North Carolina pumps water out of the Catawba basin, that water will never make it back to the Catawba in South Carolina.

Before we jump to the conclusion that IBTs are bad, consider this, among other things, the water that we use in Indian Land comes from a plant that is part of a joint venture between LCWSD and Union County, North Carolina. And the water that the joint venture sends to Union County is, in part, an IBT.

In theory, at least, if IBT’s are outlawed, that joint venture wouldn’t be allowed to continue in its current form. The net result could be dramatically higher costs for water countywide, especially in Indian Land.

There are other problems as well, including the fact that part of Lancaster County, mostly east of Highway 522, is in the Pee Dee basin. Without an IBT, LCWSD wouldn’t be permitted to use water from the Catawba to serve folks out that way, and might have to build entirely separate infrastructure to serve that area. That is not a cheap alternative, and we would all bear the costs.

The bottom line, then, is that a restriction on IBTs could lead to higher water rates for all of us. It could also materially impact economic growth.

So, with all of that, you can see why the battle lines in the Water Wars aren’t as clear as they might at first appear.

Because of the critical impact that that Catawba has on our future, and especially our cost of living and economic development, I asked the Speaker of the House to consider me for the Catawba/Wateree River Basin Advisory Commission, a group of legislators, businesspeople, and environmentalists from both Carolinas working on, among other things, a voluntary resolution to the “Water Wars.” The Speaker has agreed to appoint

me, and my work on that commission begins in earnest in January. As a result, I hope to be able to be on the front line of the Water Wars as we try to find a resolution that protects both Lancaster County and South Carolina.

I will keep you up to date on what I learn.

Mick Mulvaney represents Lancaster, Van Wyck, Indian Land, and Fort Mill, in the SC State House. He can be reached at mulvaneym@scstatehouse.org, via his website, www.mickmulvaney.com, or 803-246-1001.