

V.B. Price

from

Albuquerque: A City at the End of the World

Chapter Nine: Promises, Promises

If you think the title of this book, *A City at the End of the World*, seems a bit over the top, consider that the New York Times in October 29, 2001, ran a map in which the state of New Mexico was mislabeled as Arizona.¹ Arizona, itself, was left unlabeled, and New Mexico was relegated so far at the end of the world, it tipped over into the realm of non-existent places. And Albuquerque, of course, is the biggest city in that missing region we call the Land of Enchantment. Some on the east coast might think such a term of endearment was chosen to represent a fantasy, a Never Never Land, too enchanting to exist. Tragically, many in Albuquerque still seem to think so too.

In the ten years since this book was published, the people who think of New Mexico as an empty space waiting to be filled with generic corporate gimcracks and the marketing fruits of bad ideas that have cluttered up the rest of the nation with a babble of strip malls, neon commercial graffiti, and endless sprawling suburbs appear to be winning the war for Albuquerque's identity. And I have to admit I'm really not sure why.

Ten years ago I thought that Albuquerque was "poised...to become a model post-end-of-the-world city – one that makes the most of being 'remote beyond compare' by shifting the emphasis of its environmental public policies from consumption to conservation – the conservation and actualization of local identity." I think I was wrong. Instead of actualizing its individuality, and making the most of its cultural complexity, arid limitation, and vast natural beauty, Albuquerque's built environment has slipped ever more closely into becoming indistinguishable from the anonymous edges of any one of a hundred other western American car towns. But I have to say, too, I don't think that was the city's deep intent. Albuquerque's urban landscape has not only languished in a mire of unfulfilled promise, but that unsettling disappointment has also been punctuated by rare, but heartening, surprises.

Who would ever have guessed that hidden in the smoggy atmosphere of dispiriting stagnation, Downtown Albuquerque, after more than 30 years of desolation, would actually be revived, somewhat, with a major new movie house, an Alvarado Hotel-like transit center, and three new courthouses? It's been a shock for many to realize that, at the beginning of the new millennium, the leading urban clients for modern New Mexico design strategies are the formerly impoverished Pueblos of Santa Ana, Sandia, and Isleta. (In our state, it seems, though, that everything good thing comes with its painful barbs and stickers, in this case gambling casinos and a glut of Pueblo resorts and golf courses.) And it feels almost unnatural that in our deeply libertarian, boomtown atmosphere two progressive urban think tanks – Shared Vision, Inc. and 1000 Friends of New Mexico – would have arisen to try to bring some sanity to our development patterns, or that City Hall, County Government, and citizens could

have created a 750 page “Planned Growth Strategy,” emphasizing infill rather than sprawl development, that many elected officials and business people say they like.

Who would have thought that the Twin Mountain Construction Company and the New Mexico State Highway Department could have redesigned and rebuilt, with minimum hassle and wasted time, something of a masterpiece of aerial roadways to replace the old eye sore of the Big I crossroads of I-40 and I-25? And who’s not surprised that the hated Montañero Road Bridge would actually get constructed and become not only a monstrous gusher of unregulated gridlock into the North Valley, but would also, ironically, be one of the more beautiful bridges in the state?

I would never have bet that state land commissioner Ray Powell could have partnered with Sandia National Laboratories and the Department of Energy to design a 2,800 acre nature refuge and environmental education campus on the eastern edge of its Mesa del Sol development next to Isleta Pueblo land. And I couldn’t have really imagined ten years ago that the Nob Hill Main Street Project would create a massively successful and energetic shopping and eating zone, anchored by a local eatery called Flying Star, that competes successfully with anything in the northeast heights.

Perhaps the greatest and happiest surprise is a work of community-designed affordable housing called Arbolera de Vida. Located in the Old Town area’s Sawmill District, on the old Duke City Lumber Yards, the Sawmill community advisory council worked with the City of Albuquerque, which owned the 27-acre project site, to create a model infill development for low income New Mexicans. The City and Sawmill residents developed the Sawmill Community Land Trust, a private non-profit corporation to hold the land for the community. The Trust prohibits real estate speculation and absentee ownership, keeping houses affordable over many generations, and guaranteeing community control of design. The residents of the Saw Mill neighborhood, and city planners, have given everyone in Albuquerque solid proof that it’s possible for local interests to engage in respectful growth and the defeat the deadening forces of generic economics and design.

But even with these sweet amazements and startling successes, Albuquerque’s promise as a unique city is starting to be overwhelmed by generic change which pays no attention to the ecological realities of our fragile landscape and chaotic weather patterns. We know that, despite the appearance of the 1000 Friends of New Mexico, “smart growth” is not a term warmly embraced by the power structure here. And that coolness comes even in the face of the “Beyond Sprawl” managed-growth initiative by the Bank of America in California and New Mexico in mid-1995. Even a major lender with a considerable and at times decisive role to play in our city’s growth couldn’t change minds here.. We know that despite a genuinely progressive young mayor in Los Ranchos, John Hooker, who fills public debate with arguments about “new urbanism” and the creation of self-contained developments, designed to cut down on commuting and car travel, that few with clout in Albuquerque, other than defeated-mayor Jim Baca, takes that seriously either.

With the exception of Baca’s four year tenure in the late 1990s and his deft orchestration of the revival of downtown, none of the old agenda of the 1970s, outlined so clearly in the much updated and amended Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Comprehensive Plan, has yet to be fulfilled.

In fact, it seems that all through the 1990s, during one of the greatest booms in American economic history, Albuquerque decided neither to focus on shoring up its New Mexican authenticity,

despite planning mandates to do so, nor to adapt its water usage to its desert climate. Albuquerque's elite didn't have to do anything innovative at all to get richer. Nor did the historical circumstances of the 1990s present the city's leadership with the kind of direct challenges that stimulate productive change, except, of course, for the looming crisis of water scarcity, which only in the new millennium began to be timidly and haltingly addressed.

No one I've talked to over the last 30 years of observing Albuquerque politics has much of a clue about how land use and other environmental decisions are really made here. And neither do I. We all know, of course, the functions of the various governmental agencies and committees, but the Wizard of Oz remains hidden. And except for population size and general sprawling expansion, nothing much seems to change, or really has changed since the 1950s. The pattern here is that when land development clashes with cultural passions and environmental imperatives it adapts itself to the obstructions, flows around them, and then prevails and keeps moving relentlessly on. Mayors and City Councils come and go, business leaders hoist a corporate hero who makes pronouncements and then moves to another city, inspired planners and powerful Deans of the UNM School of Architecture and Planning articulate grand visions and are forgotten, neighborhood advocates and managed growth activists rise up and are heard and then subside exhausted. Frustrated big wigs and deal makers complain bitterly that Albuquerque's growth is stalemated by conflict, but that's an illusion. Just look at how the city's grown. No place is free from regionally unresponsive generic development. No part of the city is free of sprawl.

How then are land use decisions made? Though I'm groping around in the fog like everyone else, it seems not unlikely to me that the answer is something like this: First, the leadership community works in mysterious ways because it is, itself, deeply fragmented and defuse, reflecting Albuquerque's overall status as a City of Babel. Second, New Mexico's general impoverishment allows many decisions to be made almost by default without the kind of governmental oversight that's needed. And, third, Albuquerque's major news outlets – the Albuquerque Journal and electronic media that uses it as a news source – are so unreflective and growth oriented that land use issues hardly ever furrow their collective editorial brows. Fragmentation and unaccountability are the easiest to analyze. Albuquerque City Government is non-partisan. No national political party is attached to any land use decision. The buck stops with no one. Coalitions are hard to build. Policies are often developed ad hoc. The closest thing to an enduring land use lobby comes from development interests who've been pushing the same uncontrolled growth agenda, and opposing virtually any and all regulation, for the better part of 50 years. The electorate is kept at bay by a regional planning body called the Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments, (COG) that produces virtually all transportation studies and masterminds all transportation decisions through a committee known as the UTPPB or Urban Transportation Planning Policy Board, comprised of elected officials from virtually every jurisdiction in the region. These elected officials, however, have no region-wide constituency, each coming from a particular town, city, county or tribe. Hence they are accountable to no general electorate for decisions that affect the whole middle Rio Grande metro area but perhaps benefit only one area to the detriment of many others. It doesn't help, either, that UTPPB members serve all but anonymously thanks to the aversion to local news evidenced by most major print and electronic media here. And the UTPPB has never seen a road it doesn't love. When you combine the workings of the UTPPB with county and city environmental planning

commissions in Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, and four counties, all of which are composed mostly of people who make their living selling or developing land, then add to this mix a fragmentation of business organizations, which include multiple chambers of commerce, Rotary clubs, the Albuquerque Economic Forum, and other groups, and a vast, but hopelessly fragmented, body of some 130 neighborhood associations, not to mention such arcane political entities with enormous clout over water like the MRGCD (The Middle Rio Grande Planning Commission,) and AMAFCA (the Albuquerque Metropolitan Arroyo and Flood Control Authority), you see what a mess it is.

Is it any wonder that normal citizens, whom polls have shown for years are opposed to sprawl and rapid growth and favor slower more considered infill development, feel they're never taken into account when land use decisions are being made – unless of course they take developers and politicians to court. When voters are ignored, their only recourse is to change roles and become plaintiffs.

So it's no surprise then that in the last ten years, none of the old political land use controversies were resolved, especially the consolidation of city and county governments, which the leadership elite has pushed for years and the newly elected mayor, centrist democrat Martin Chavez, has pledged to make a reality, despite the bitter protest of county voters. But while the city grows and public policy stumbles along, staggering new problems, long unattended to, are, indeed, now slowly breaking into public consciousness. These new problems are symbolized by water warfare between towns and cities, farmers, Native Americans, and environmental interest groups and massive new developments on the far edges of town. If ever evidence were needed that the years and years of environmental planning and general palaver about growth, and the ecological stress that comes from too much of it, have come to little or no avail, look far, far west, and far, far east. The Albuquerque Academy's Mariposa development with its 7,000 proposed homes in an "environmentally sensitive planned community" on the outer limits of Rio Rancho near US 550, almost half way to San Ysidro, looks like its learned the necessary lessons about smart growth and new urbanism. And perhaps it has. The only problem is that it amounts to the farthest vanguard of urban sprawl in the history of westside development. It's so far from other houses or any jobs that residents there could end up being stranded in their luxurious sensitivity during an oil crisis as severe as those of 1974 and 1979. Or take the Campbell Ranch development on north Highway 14 in the east mountains, with its hotels, golf courses, and thousands of houses on 18,000 acres. In what's been called "one of the most extraordinary moments in the history of local government,"² Campbell Ranch, after concluding that Bernalillo County planning regulations were too restrictive, petitioned successfully to be annexed into the town of Edgewood in the Estancia Valley many miles from its development site. There's never been an annexation like it. Talk about stretching a point! And Edgewood, as of January 2002, was being sued by Santa Fe County to make sure the town has the money it will take to provide all the services Campbell Ranch will need, so county government won't have to.

Former Mayor David Rusk, who lost his bid for re-election in 1981, once argued that Albuquerque's metro area growth was not complicated by the same kind of jurisdictional fracturing that plagues Denver, Los Angeles, and other western cities. When it comes to sheer volume of jurisdictions, that's still true. But both governments and citizen action groups in Rio Rancho, Placitas, Corrales, Cedar Crest, Tijeras, Los Lunas, Belen, Bosque Farms, Edgewood, Sandoval County, Valencia County,

Torrence County, and Sandia, Laguna, Santa Ana, and Isleta Pueblos, make enough of a jurisdictional jumble that it's hard even for nationally dominant corporations, at times, to get much done in our area. Even Wal-Mart failed in the late 1990s to get a foothold in the Village of Tijeras, largely due the opposition put up by the extremely well organized, conservation oriented, neighborhood group called the East Mountain Legal Defense Fund [EMLDF]. But Albuquerque and Bernalillo County's urban form, and all their official efforts to contain sprawl, was thwarted when Intel, the largest computer chip manufacturer in the world, bought land in, and was feasted with \$8 billion in industrial revenue bonds by, Sandoval County, right on the Bernalillo county line.

While, to the casual observer, Albuquerque and environs might still look pretty much the same as they did in 1992, if not slightly worse, beneath the physical and political surface vast forces of change are at work, and like it or not, one day every government in the area will have to respond to them.

I'm intrigued by the coincidence that the two most dramatic forces of change – the realization of water scarcity and the appearance of Pueblo governments as major players in urban development – began almost simultaneously, and oddly unnoticed, during the tenure of the all but invisible mayor of Albuquerque, Democrat Louis Saavedra, who served four years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the surreal first term of another all but invisible politician, Republican Governor Gary Johnson, who ended his 8 years in office in 2002. As the story goes, Mayor Saavedra, wanting to avoid major political struggles over water conservation, decided to conduct a study instead, the first one of its kind, measuring Albuquerque's aquifer using USGS monitoring devices in city wells. As the data began to add up it became clear to hydrologists at the USGS survey that Albuquerque was not sitting atop a body of water the size of Lake Superior as city boomers had always claimed. Rather it was draining a number of relatively small deep pools of water – one near Kirtland Air Force Base in the southeast heights and another near the Ladera section of the West Mesa – much faster than they were being recharged. When that story was first reported in 1989 by Tony Davis of the Albuquerque Tribune, hardly any one paid attention to it. It took almost the whole decade for city officials and Albuquerque's invisible leadership community to realize that our area is running out of water. And many are still in denial.

The other profound unintended consequence of political maneuvering was when the then young Gov. Gary Johnson rammed through what turned out to be an unconstitutional set of compacts with some 9 Rio Grande Pueblo governments to allow "Indian gaming." Johnson could not have imagined in 1996 that Pueblos around Albuquerque would become so wealthy, and be so well-managed financially, that their own development efforts could well become the single most determining factor in Albuquerque's urban form over the next 50 years.

I'm not suggesting, though, that nobody saw Albuquerque was facing major problems long ago. In 1986, the Albuquerque Tribune published a 24-page pullout section called "Albuquerque 2000."³ This set of analyses, more than any other, reveals that Albuquerque has done almost nothing to alter its growth and land-use policies to fit contemporary conditions. In 1986, the city was working off plans, concepts, and aspirations that were at least 30 years old. And I think it's safe to say that we're still operating on that same view of the world at the start of the new millennium. In 1986, The Tribune predicted Albuquerque's water supply would be drying up and full of contamination by the turn of the century. "Water might even have to be pumped from the San Juan Basin, near Mount Taylor, to

satiate development on the West Mesa,” The Tribune observed with prescience. It added that “until the pocketbook dictates water use practices, it will tough to change Albuquerque attitudes. But conservationists believe the effort should begin now.” Albuquerque still has some of the least expensive residential water in the Southwest. And what conservation has been practiced in the last 15 years or so has been offset by population growth stimulated by sprawl development that’s been speeded up by roads and bridges that were sold to voters as solving rush hour congestion, but really only jammed roadways all the more.

Maybe it’s just me, but trying to find a clear stream of logic running through the last ten years of Albuquerque’s urban history, I keep running into streams of cause and effect as clogged up as Coors Boulevard at rush hour. Perhaps one useful way to get at what’s happened in the years since those Tribune predictions is to concentrate on three polarized situations: First, two competing plans with major potential influence, a transportation plan that seems like a holdover from the Eisenhower era, and a planned growth strategy that appears simultaneously to be the new embodiment of the anti-sprawl progressive spirit of the 1970s, but a too-little-too-late token gesture at managed growth. Second, two looming scarcities, oil and water, and how they relate to the first two plans. And third, two approaches to development, the Pueblo approach and the developer-led, bottom line, *liazè faire* approach on the West Mesa with its mile after torturous mile of miserable nonsense roads.

As Alan Reed, former Albuquerque City Councilor and prominent member of the 1000 Friends of New Mexico, wrote in the organization’s newsletter, *Nuestro Pueblo*, the New Mexico State Highway Department’s “Middle Rio Grande Connections” study is full of “loops to nowhere.”⁴ And yet the “connections” study could become the underlying growth blueprint in the metro area for generations. A major recommendation of the study, which calls for building a superhighway called Paseo de Volcan west of Unser on the West Mesa, was approved by a 12-7 vote by the UTPPB in mid January 2002. As there’s not a living soul anywhere in sight out there, Paseo de Volcan, a so-called loop road connecting I-40 with US-550, is a pure and simple golden gift to developers from the taxpayers of New Mexico, a sprawl subsidy that really no one who follows the weather, the economy, the water crisis, or the news about extended long term war in oil country in the Middle East would ever dream of suggesting. And that’s not all. There’s another proposed road that’s truly “shocking,” according to Reed. The Middle Rio Grande Connections “seriously advocates building two freeways between I-40 west of Albuquerque and NM (sic) 550...” The second loop road is so far west of the Double Eagle II airport it doesn’t really have a name. Reed, a Democrat turned Republican, estimates the cost at about \$12 million per mile, “leading to a \$240 million bill for the short freeway (Paseo de Volcan) and about \$500 million for the longer freeway. The traffic demand,” he says, on the shorter road “would amount to less than two percent of all interstate traffic! This leads us to the conclusion that there is little traffic justification for either of them. The only apparent beneficiaries would be land developers along the routes.”

The spin argument that loop roads provide a development boundary for a city has long ago been debunked. Loops simply make it possible for development to occurs both inside them and outside them to a virtually limitless degree, often extending the outer edge for miles.. Reed is right, of course, about the complete lack of current traffic justification for those roads. North Unser Boulevard, the farthest road west at the moment, is a lovely, wide winding road through some 18 miles of utterly barren and

supremely beautiful New Mexico countryside. You can pick it up past Southern Boulevard and drive all the way to US 550 and pass by only one little island of houses, connected by one forlorn little road. The irony is, of course, that Unser, along this stretch, is about the best road on the whole, overstuffed Westside nearer the river.

Despite virtually every other article in the daily papers dealing with impending water shortages, despite being worried about depleted oil reserves and an uneasy dependence on foreign oil, even Democrats are hot for westside roads. Mayor-again Marty Chavez, whose first term and second term are separated by the Baca administration, has vowed to do everything he can to extend Paseo del Norte through the Petroglyph National Monument and hook it up with a completed Unser. And that's despite continuing and strenuous objections from Pueblos who consider the site, and its "rock art," sacred ground for all the pueblos up and down the Rio Grande. Considering that the major pueblos in the Albuquerque area have unadjudicated senior water rights, and enough money to defend them forever in the courts, one wonders why the Albuquerque mayor would offend their religious traditions. New Mexico's Republican Congressional delegation has already attacked Sandia Pueblo's claim to the northwest side of the Sandia Mountains, using language that implied nefarious dealings, charges that I'm sure no pueblo person will ever forget.

Ironically, the most newsworthy opponents of the Paseo del Norte extension through the Petroglyphs National Monument is a national environmental group called Republicans for Environmental Protection. Jim Scarantino, president of the New Mexico Chapter, sees the roadway as an instrument of sprawl just as 1000 Friends does. "One of the dirty little secrets about sprawl is that it's a taxpayer ripoff," he's quoted as saying.⁵ Characteristically, the very conservative Albuquerque Journal was outraged in an editorial, entitled "When Enviros Protest Cost, Be Suspicious," that any environmental group, Republican or not, should attach a taxpayer price to a road extension.⁶ In Albuquerque, loyalty to the sprawl lobby comes even before party loyalty, or so it seems.

If transportation planning has always been a spur to booming sprawl development, what's known loosely as "comprehensive planning" has been something of a conservative, restraining force. Since the 1970s, all versions of the Albuquerque/Bernalillo Comprehensive Plan have mandated that infill development be given at least equal priority to growth on the fringes where roads and water and sewer lines, and police and fire protection, are non-existent and must ultimately be paid for by taxpayers. Infill means not only using up vacant land, but also maintaining the public resources and infrastructure that already exist within the city's developed core, much of which is decaying.

The Comprehensive Plan was always an inspiration to conservationists, but it had, as the saying goes, no teeth, no laws or incentive strategies to encourage infill. In 2001, another comprehensive planning document appeared, all 750 pages of it, that assigns priority to infill development. It's called The Planned Growth Strategy and is a joint effort by Bernalillo County and the City of Albuquerque.⁷ This massive undertaking has what it calls seven basic ideas⁸ gleaned from Town Halls, citizen surveys, planning and engineering consultants, and existing planning documents. No one has any idea, of course, if this document and its suggestions will be any more fruitful in directing growth to serve public needs and ease taxpayer expenses than the efforts of the 1970s. But I'd rather play the slots at a casino than bet it will.

Under the heading “What the Public Told Us They Wanted,” the seven basic ideas are: 1. “Local government should play a proactive role.” This means that city and county officials should try to help developers stick to the strategies’ view of growth. 2. “Whether in new or older area, not just development but community.” This seems to be inspired by a “new urbanist” emphasis on village-style development, emphasizing pedestrian environments. 3. “The existing community – neighborhoods, schools and businesses – comes first in vitality and development.” I presume this is an infill development mandate. 4. “Maintain, rehabilitate, & improve infrastructure in existing neighborhoods.” 5. “Grow efficiently – develop first where infrastructure exists.” 6. “Don’t just plan – implement.” And 7. “Keep us involved – every step of the way.”

In Part Two of the Planned Growth Strategy, the “Preferred Alternative,” a call is made for “an urban development paradigm shift.”⁹ Albuquerque’s “existing paradigm for urban development is that government will be responsive to incremental private development initiatives with limited controls to avoid negative consequences.” Infrastructure planning is basically “reactive.” “The City water and sewer utility currently has no procedure to estimate the cost-effectiveness of service expansions... Urban development at the fringe largely is developer driven.” This “reactive and piecemeal approach” has resulted in, among other things, over-crowded schools and streets “in growing fringe areas;...[and] a more than \$700 million dollar backlog of infrastructure deficiency projects, deficiencies in the street system which exceed the cost of supporting new urban development for the next 25 years...”

The development community seems oddly unperturbed by these suggestions. They see The Planned Growth Strategy as, indeed, a growth oriented plan of attack. Whereas, in the past, development interests loudly objected to giving infill priority status, here “developers and ‘smart growth’ advocates agree,” according to a report by Albuquerque Tribune business reporter Nancy Salem.¹⁰ The Home Builder’s Association of Central New Mexico thinks the plan makes sense because it supports predictable, stable growth and “growth generates income.” The smart growth 1000 Friends of New Mexico seems to like it for its balance. More progressive water conservationists, on the other hand, think it’s all a bunch of baloney, because they see no discussion of water in the plan. Maybe I’m being cynical, but there’s a good chance that developers and their lobbying organizations are unfazed by the Planned Growth Strategy’s emphasis on building in areas with existing infrastructure because most of the low cost fringe development in the future will take place outside of Albuquerque and Bernalillo county – in Sandoval, Santa Fe and Torrence Counties, and in Rio Rancho and Los Lunas – and, therefore, beyond the jurisdiction of the plan.

For instance, some of the most beautiful and spiritually inspiring land forms on the planet, with views across the Santa Ana reservation to the Jemez Mountains on US 550, are about to be despoiled by Rio Rancho developers, once those new western loop roads are built. Any development out there amounts to a desecration, as far as I’m concerned. I always used to take out-of-town friends and family up US 550 to look at the view as you topped out onto what we think of as the Zia/Santa Ana Valley with its long view of the red cliffs of the Jemez and southern edges of the gray and white banded Bisti badlands. That “viewfield,” as planners and builders call it, is irreplaceable and every bit as startling and monumental as the view of the Sandias from the opposite direction. It’s been a nasty surprise to watch that land approaching that view get bulldozed over, transformed into a red dust, Martian no man’s land.

But perhaps, in the odd way the world works, what to some people is an unthinkable calamity will rescue those desert views from the depredations of suburbia.

The unthinkable might, indeed, be upon us. Both current transportation planning and managed growth strategies could well run up against the inevitable bottoming out of the basic resources of oil and water. And in overbuilt, arid, vast, central New Mexico a shortage of either one is a disaster, while a shortage of both could amount to what corporate merger masterminds might call the “creative destruction” of our present state of old fashioned thinking.

Will the world find itself in a price spiraling oil crisis any time soon? It didn't take much in 1974 and 1979 for shortages and high prices in imported petroleum to reverberate destructively through the whole American economy. And in New Mexico, the effects were close to crippling, even then when the vast majority of our metropolitan population was still living within the core area. Unlike today, the far fringes of the desert and the mountains, miles away from jobs and essential retail centers, were still reserved for pioneers and easterners who didn't know any better. But I get nervous when I stumble across book reviews and articles that refuse to deny the possibility of a major oil shortage coming from war and social unrest in the Middle East. And I get really upset when I see book reviews of obscure but highly credible texts like Kenneth S. Deffeyes's work from Princeton University Press called “The Impending World Oil Shortage.” An oil geologist turned Princeton professor, Deffeyes, according to reviewer J.R. McNeill in the *Wilson Quarterly*¹¹ predicts that “world oil production will peak between 2004 and 2008 and decline thereafter, with potentially calamitous consequences.” I can just smell the carcasses of rotting SUVs all over Rio Rancho and the East Mountains. An oil crisis in Albuquerque right now would leave everyone hurting, and tens of thousands all but stranded in their commuter exurb utopia.

And I can't imagine what might happen if oil prices up the costs of trucked-in food so much that poor people here have a harder time making ends meet, especially if Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, and big developments on the fringes are buying up water rights from farmers. With various PR machines still grinding out enticements for businesses and homeowners to move to our city, I wonder sometimes if we'd have enough water left to grow our own food if we needed to?

But despite my own dark broodings, when it comes to thinking about water, Albuquerque is in an entirely different state of mind than it was ten years ago. From my perspective as a columnist, the water scene looks fairly straight forward, even if agencies, corporate bureaucracies, activists and politicians all try to mess it up with funny money numbers. It's hard to pin anyone down on exact figures. But it doesn't take a statistician to see that the overall picture isn't very good for growth, or for just simply watering our lawns and trees.

Even though such a venerable thinker about land speculation and ranching as former Governor Bruce King once told me, “V.B., ya can always find more water,” many conservationists and people in state government, and in city and county agencies all over New Mexico, are worried that there really might not be enough water to go around anymore. The fear that the humane idea of “shared scarcity” could get pulverized by the win/lose water combat ahead. They know the era of federal water projects is over. There are no new rivers to dam. Generally speaking, all the water in the west is already spoken for. So is there anyplace left to turn? For some prominent thinkers, agricultural water is the great hope of

cities and developers. For farmers, though, cities seem like cartoon vultures licking their chops.

William Riebsame, a professor of geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder, figures that “if half the agricultural water use in the West shifted to urban uses, the region could support, at its current rates of use, a fivefold increase in urban population, and this without extracting a single new drop of water from streams and aquifers.” Riebsame argues that 80-90 percent of western water is used for agriculture. He goes so far as to say “The West is too wet.”¹² He adds, however, that getting that water won’t be “painless.” That’s the understatement of the decade.

My reading of New Mexico’s situation is much different than that. If Albuquerque doesn’t get its annual 48,000 acre feet of San Juan/Chama project water, John Stomp, city water planner, told me, the City will go to Socorro and Sierra Counties and buy up all the water rights it can. In fact, farmers and organic growers in the south say Albuquerque is already looking for paper water. And if that isn’t enough, the City can always go out to Grants, I hear, and buy water from its Blue Lake aquifer, the same water that Peabody Energy needs to use a part of to run its expanded coal mine and proposed new power plant 25 miles north of Grants on the Lee Ranch. Everywhere I look, I see conflict when it comes to Albuquerque getting more water. Conflict with Pueblos and their senior water rights, conflicts with the Navajo and their claims to San Juan Basin water, conflicts with acequia associations, with farmers, with other municipalities and developments, with river advocates and endangered species conservationists, and the venerable Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) and its hundreds of miles of irrigation and drainage canals in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. The MRGCD contends that any draining off of the agricultural water from its unlined ditch system will threaten the trees and green spaces in the North and South Valleys and fundamentally destroy their semi-rural character. There just seems no end to conflict, because New Mexico is not too wet.

And the weather isn’t helping either. Scientists are reportedly worrying about the last three dry years here being the beginning of a ten to twenty year drought. The last one of those, in the mid 1950s saw Elephant Butte lake go dry as a bone for almost three years. Albuquerque’s aquifer, the USGS tells us, isn’t recharging anywhere near as fast as it’s being depleted, and its being depleted so fast that we could be in a crisis situation within 40 years even with new San Juan/Chama water. And the arithmetic just never quite adds up when highly touted city conservation efforts are compared to growth projections.

And horror stories in other towns abound around us. Santa Fe has been on stringent water restrictions for the last two years. And Las Vegas, New Mexico, has had year round water conservation measures in effect since 1999. They’re both just plain running out of water. Las Vegas has been using too much of the flow from its main water source, the Gallinas River, and is being sued by acequia farmers down stream. And even with that extra water, Las Vegas still can’t bring its water budget into the black. El Paso and Juarez are years, not decades, away from outgrowing their rights to underground water, and Alamogordo is so hard up it’s thinking about desalinization and using heavily treated waste water for drinking. Mexico has its own claims to Rio Pecos and Rio Grande water which impinge on farming practices on the east side of the state.

And questions about water quality still rise up from time to time, even though nobody really wants to think about them. Even boomer optimism can’t avoid superfund sites in the South Valley and

West Mesa, EPA warnings about high arsenic levels in our water, controversies over an old nuclear waste dump on Sandia Base, endless news reports of leaking underground gasoline storage tanks and septic systems in the Valleys, not to mention hundreds of anecdotal stories over the years of increased birth defects and other maladies in the South Valley around the convergence of an old meat packing plant, above ground petroleum storage tanks, and numerous defense contractors and the plume of contaminants that state and federal scientists have been tracking for years.

Water is not something you can bank on in New Mexico. As an editorial in the Santa Fe New Mexican put it, "This is a desert state of over-diverted rivers, over-pumped aquifers and over-subscribed water rights; we can't go on behaving as if we live on the Mississippi Delta."¹³ For all the transportation and land use plans Albuquerque and New Mexico have generated over the years, it's an amazement to me that we still have nothing that resembles a regional water use plan, much less a state water use plan. We don't even have an accurate, or at least credible, inventory of all our water sources that the public and their representatives could readily refer to.

In all the thousands of news reports about water in the last years, I have never seen a reliable, hard-number estimate on how much pumpable water Albuquerque has left in its aquifer. I'm sure an exact number is hard to get. But not to have even a ballpark figure in public circulation makes the rest of the calculations virtually meaningless. If we don't know how much we have, how can we subtract our yearly usage from the total and project how much time we have until it's all gone? And yet we keep building golf courses. And if we don't link population growth to water usage, then all our conservation measures and projections are pure fantasy, based on our current metro-area population of 727,000. The Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments forecasts our population will double by 2050. A mere 20 years from now, we'll have grown to 950,000. If 60 percent of city water use is residential, such a population explosion will make conservation meaningless. And even if we do secure the 48,000 acre-feet a year from the San Juan/Chama Project, how's that going to help us 50 years from now when our children are ready to retire, if we've added, say, another 100,000 acre feet of residential usage our current 170,000 acre feet a year pumped from the aquifer?

Add to all this the rise of the Pueblos as major players in development around Albuquerque's fringes, including the possibility of 99-year lease subdivisions, and the water issues all up and down the middle Rio Grande Valley become a consternating mess of uncertainties. There's no question that Pueblo developers will become the target of others who complain about their so-called special privileges as "sovereign" entities, and who bitterly argue against their senior claims to water, and their often legally and historically well-documented ownership of contested lands.

Most observers would agree, I think, that the best privately financed large developments in our region of late have come from the Pueblos. The Santa Ana casino/hotel complex outside of Bernalillo could have been an aesthetic disaster, but it's amazingly low key architecturally and aware of its place in the landscape. And Santa Ana's brand new Hyatt Tamaya hotel, down by the pueblo's part of the bosque, is arguably among the handsomest, least obtrusive, most New Mexican of new hotels in the state. What a far cry Tamaya is from the anonymous but skyline dominating Hyatt hotel towers in downtown Albuquerque, subsidized by federal grants, with City Hall as the architect's client. Albuquerque's officials characteristically took what they could get which was a clone of buildings in Texas. Santa Ana's

officials demanded and got a building with the sense of place they wanted.

Once it accumulated sufficient capital, Sandia Pueblo abandoned its eye-sore white tent casino on I-25, and created an elegant, low lying, land-respecting casino on the lower foothills of the Sandias that is a model of how such developments should be designed. Far from being a disrespectful monstrosity that ruins the view of the mountains, Sandia's casino complex puts to shame the developers who have cluttered up the West and East Mesas with standard, anyplace strip malls, glaring signage, and subdivisions.

There's little doubt among architects and planners I know that Sandia, Isleta, and Santa Ana are planning more development, possibly subdivisions to compete with the more shoddy work of non-tribal developers. They could raise the standard considerably, while sucking up more and more water from the aquifer. Sandia Pueblo's Governor Stewart Paisano plans to go slowly in working with the 2,000 developable acres around his casino where it's possible new restaurants, high end retail outlets, and perhaps even housing could be built. "We're in a position where we don't have to act right away," Paisano was quoted as saying.¹⁴ From what I've seen so far, if necessity demands, I'd welcome a development battle between westside developers and the Pueblos. I'd bet the Pueblos could build better quality houses in perhaps innovative clusters and enclaves, like La Luz, on the West Mesa, and use the market place to force other developers to clean up their acts.

It's the work Santa Ana and Sandia have done so far on their bosques that sets them apart in our region. Both tribes have been working to restore the bosque under their control, clearing out non-native plants, removing the fire hazards of old timber and generally opening up the riverside woods to become, once again, a usable and spacious gallery of cottonwoods much like it was before the war. I think of that effort and compare it to how developers and politicians have allowed the Westside go to pot, a planning disaster that has left residents there with the worst roads in the metro area. What could be more of a disaster than the donkey trail known as Golf Course Road which passes for a major north south arterial on the westside? That's a road elected officials allowed developers to get away with, a haphazard, afterthought of a road that everyone has to use and hates, as they wait and wait in long lines cursing who knows who? How does something like that get built? By default. And who defaulted? The Albuquerque area leadership-elite.

The overall picture of the last ten years tells a sad story of lost promise, lost opportunity, and failed leadership that amounts to a metro-area that's grown in a state of anarchy - undisciplined, imprudent, unrestrained. And yet, despite all the over extension of resources, all the wasteful unlimited development and generic new design, all the heedlessness to warnings about water shortages, and the stubborn insistence on maintaining the unworkable status quo at any price, Albuquerque remains, in places, pretty much the inviting city it has always been, a college town, a scientific utopia, the intellectual center of America's most foreign state, a place of vast natural beauty, and enormous human talent whose physical form is still happily overshadowed by the grandeur of its high desert landscape. But for how long?

When Albuquerque lost its triple A Dodger farm team, The Albuquerque Dukes, which went to the northwest coast, city movers and shakers, including its bankers and investment moguls, couldn't put up the civic energy, nor the bucks, to find on their own another baseball team, despite the efforts of

Mayor Jim Baca, and the overwhelming support of this sports crazed community. The leadership elite was looking after their own business as usual, and not paying its civic dues. Mayor Baca finally found a Chicago financier who summers outside of Las Vegas, New Mexico, to come to the city's rescue, buy another team, and stimulate the construction of a new stadium. This seemingly unrelated incident mirrors what seems to me to be the dominant mind set in Albuquerque since 1992 – a leadership elite which works almost exclusively for private gain and does relatively nothing to influence constructive and realistic public policy. And I'm troubled that I see no political alternative in the works, certainly nothing approaching the kind of coalition building that has helped environmentalists and ranchers create a new spirit of cooperation and scientific give and take about how best to use private and public leased grazing land. Albuquerque needs the leadership of a powerful group of enlightened business leaders, smart growth advocates, cultural activists, environmentalists, farmers, developers and labor unions to do the kind of serious thinking and jawboning it takes to break through the status quo of city building by default. But I've yet to see anything like that on the political horizon.

It may well be that the only thing that can rescue Albuquerque's built environment from total generic anarchy over the next decade is the harsh discipline of necessity in the form of an international oil crisis, price hikes, drought, and the inevitable water wars and growing shortages that no one, not even boomer optimists, can explain away any longer as environmental hype and illusion. Albuquerque's years of internal struggle since WWII, its fundamental political war between advocates of prudent, regional, respectful growth and helter-skelter-do anything- anywhere sprawl could well be decided in the next twenty years when limits are reached and local leadership has to take its civic duty seriously and start to do what it takes to make Albuquerque into a city that adapts itself to its natural surroundings and arid conditions, that begins the long process of learning how to design with nature and not against it.

¹ The infamous map was attached to an article by Ross E. Millay called "Anthrax Hides Along Cattle Trails of the Old West." It appeared in the *New York Times* October 29, 2001 on page A9.

² Long time local observer Wally Gordon made this assessment in his article "Analysis" Edgewood Makes History," in an east mountain tabloid called *The Independent*, which has nothing to do with the venerable, but defunct, *New Mexico Independent* run for years in the 1970s and 1980s by Mark and Mary Beth Acuff. See: *The Independent*, December 5-11, 2001, p.13.

³ This remarkable document was published on September 8, 1986 and covered everything from population growth, healthcare, crime, and the economy to the water supply, education, transportation, and the environment.

⁴ *Nuestro Pueblo*, Fall 2001, p 3. A copy can be obtained from 1000 Friends of New Mexico.

⁵ *The Albuquerque Tribune*, "Group takes pre-emptive strike at Paseo extension," by Kate Nash, mid-

November, 2001, p. A1.

⁶ *The Albuquerque Journal*, , November 23, 2001, editorial page.

⁷ The Planned Growth Strategy is billed as being “NOT ‘no growth’ or ‘slow growth,’” presumably in an effort to detach the idea of growth management from the bogus accusation that conservationists advocate no growth. The two volumes of The Planned Growth Strategy have no date or other references attached to them. I remember receiving my copies some time in early to mid 2001. The City Council and County Commission will consider it, observers assumed, before the end of 2002.

⁸ These are spelled out in an undated, unauthored handout that accompanied the two volume Strategy.

⁹ Volume Two, p. 4-11.

¹⁰ “Just The Beginning,” *ABQBiz*, the weekly business section of *The Albuquerque Tribune*, January 21, 2002, p.1.

¹¹ “Just The Beginning,” *ABQBiz*, the weekly business section of *The Albuquerque Tribune*, January 21, 2002, p. 1.

¹² 11. Riebsame, William E. “Geographies of the New West,” in *Across the Great Divide: Exploration in Collaborative Conservation and the American West*, edited by Philip Brick, Donald Snow, and Sarah Van de Wetering. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001. p. 50.

¹³ *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 19, 2002, p A-5.

¹⁴ “Tribe’s Plan Is Cautious,” by Patrick Armijo, *Albuquerque Journal*, Westside, November 24, 2001, p. A-1.