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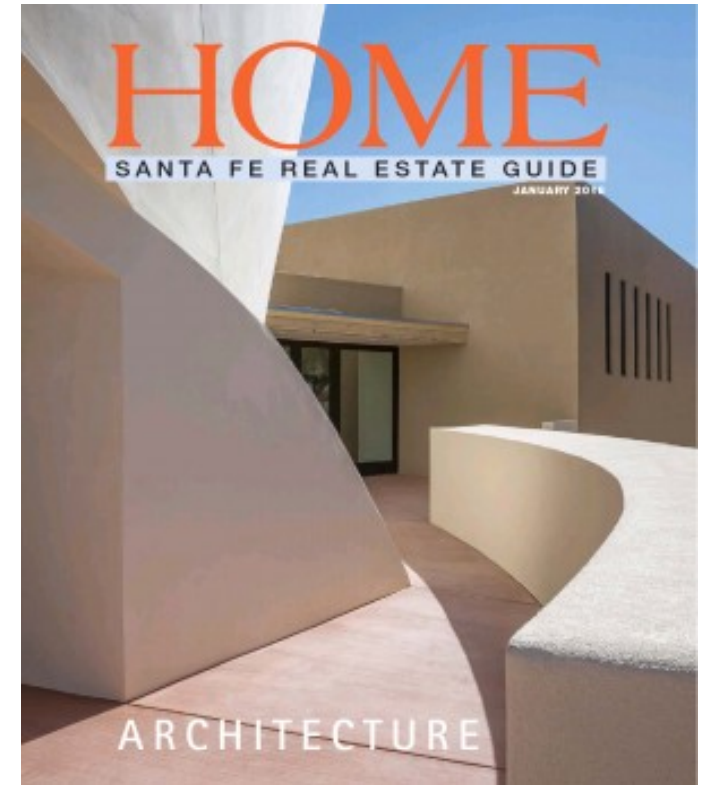
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Posted: Saturday, December 14, 2013 7:00 am

By Nate Downey
For The New Mexican

When Texas voters approved a \$2 billion expenditure for water projects, you'd think that attendees at the American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association conference in Austin would have been thrilled. It was the first time that the

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relatively young association had teamed up with the long-established Irrigation Association for a conference. Simply put, the trade show flooded the Austin Convention Center.

Even among the truck-mounted water artillery, the mega-pumping-station demonstration videos, and the center-pivot-irrigation billboards, water conservation was on the tip of everybody's tongue — especially over at the rainwater pavilion. “Now is the time to take a better look at the resources we get from the sky,” said Mark Pape, director of the Texas Rainwater Catchment Association.

“Water harvesting is a viable tool when communities start costing the long-term maintenance of dredging lakes and reservoirs.” Surrounded by a forest of filters, pumps, tanks, pipes and gauges, Pape's eyes widened. “Silt and other forms of pollution are very expensive to remove from traditional surface-water supplies.

“It's also expensive to treat and pump water from far away. Why not prevent our existing surface-water supplies from silting up — especially when we create an additional go-to, localized water supply at the same time? If any government wants to get the most for its money, it should support the small businesses that are at the cutting edge of water harvesting,” explained Pape, a CPA who is also the chairman of the board of a company called H2Options.

As much as he was an inspiration, Pape also told me not to get excited about the recent vote. “If anything, it'll hurt rainwater harvesting, since the state's focus now will be on large infrastructure projects.”

In contrast, here in New Mexico, forward-thinking state legislators such as Sen. Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, have some creative, sensible and locally oriented plans in mind. Wirth is talking about at least two measures — in the nascent bill-drafting stages, still far from the governor's desk — that would promote water harvesting. Both would have a profound positive impact for homeowners as well as for the



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state's water supply.

One measure would create a tax credit for residential and commercial property owners who install cistern systems. At press time, Wirth was thinking that the refund would be capped at \$5,000 and pay for up to 20 percent of a rainwater-harvesting system.

The other idea is to figure out a way to jump-start Wirth's successful 2006 effort that allowed for the creation of energy districts. These districts would have

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that allowed for the creation of energy districts. These districts would have financed solar-panel installations across New Mexico. Although the bill passed and was signed by Gov. Bill Richardson, nothing materialized because Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac came out against the law. Now that Fanny and Freddie have been weakened by the 2008 crash, is now the time to allow energy districts to be created? If so, Wirth has started to ask, why not create water districts for water harvesting systems?

Texas is known for being big, thinking big, doing big things. Too bad for the Lone Star State that small is often beautiful when it comes to the economics of 21st-century water systems.

Nate Downey is the author of Harvest the Rain (Sunstone Press, 2010) and the president of Santa Fe Permaculture, Inc. You can contact him through his new company website, www.permadesign.com.

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