It was my privilege to serve the public as a director for the Desert Water Agency from 1992 through 2012. When I say “serve the public,” I mean it in the most literal way. DWA is a nonprofit government agency that is led by a publicly elected board of directors. Their meetings are subject to the Brown Act, and their records are open for public inspection.

During this 20 years on the board, I had numerous occasions to meet and plan with other governmental agencies. Those included the cities of Palm Springs and Cathedral City, water agencies including Coachella Valley Water District and Mission Springs Water District, and several meetings with the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

My family moved to Palm Springs in 1955, and I developed many relationships during those years. We felt we could pick up the phone and get to the bottom of issues without having to resort to lawsuits. While we didn’t always agree, we all felt we were doing what was best for our valley.

Another local boy who grew up in the valley and served on a board for many years was Richard Milanovich. Richard was a tremendous leader for not only the tribe, but for the valley. There were many times when he met with DWA to discuss water projects, and while I often felt he was the better negotiator, I also was convinced he had the best interests of the entire valley in mind. I have a strong belief that if Richard were alive this acrimonious relationship between the tribe and DWA would not exist.

As I read about the Agua Caliente tribe suing DWA, I can’t help think that the tribe is really suing the public. The rights to the water are yours—not DWA’s or the tribe’s. Water is a public good. You pay a bill to DWA for the costs of pumping, testing and delivering that safe, quality water to your home or business.

The tribe’s lawsuit asks for senior rights to the basin. It does not ask for water equivalent to their reservation land, or a specific amount of water to meet the tribe’s needs, but for senior rights in the basin. That right would put them first in line: in front of other tribes, in front of other stakeholders, in front of you—all member of the public.

Also, they claim there is mismanagement of the basin, yet no solution is proposed. The tribe has no infrastructure such as wells, pumps, tanks and pipes, nor do they have any expertise in this complicated industry. What do they think they will do that DWA is not currently doing? There are a couple of options being tossed around like pre-filtering the Colorado River water prior to using it for replenishment. This is a very expensive solution to a problem that doesn’t exist. Sure, the total dissolved solids are higher in the basin than they were years ago, but they are still well within standards. The water is clean and safe already. It is filtered through 300 feet of sand and rock before it gets to the aquifer.
Another proposed option is building a pipe to the State Water Project. This has been studied at length by DWA and several other water agencies. It would be a last-resort solution due to its extremely high cost. Again, a costly solution to a nonexistent problem.

Since 1961, DWA has worked hard to protect the groundwater basins and to deliver good-tasting, safe water. DWA is one of only 29 contractors in the entire State Water Project. DWA and CVWD combined are the third-largest contractors in the project. In other words, they have a major role in the project. The staff at DWA are professionals who receive peer recognition every year from state agencies and industry experts. They are doing a tremendous job safeguarding your water.

I encourage you to look at the DWA website at www.dwa.org/Tribal-Lawsuit for more information on this lawsuit. Look at the water quality reports and look at DWA’s long-term plans for the area. Do not believe the bluster of the language of the tribes pleading in the suit as anyone can claim anything in a lawsuit. Instead, believe the science of the water tests, believe the experts in this area and believe your own taste buds.

The water in the Coachella Valley belongs to everyone, and it should remain that way.

Ron Starks served on the Desert Water Agency board for 20 years, including three years as president. This column represents his views, not the views of the board. Email him ps.starrs@gmail.com