

Bill Would Create North Harris County Regional Water Authority

Ensuring a long-term supply of potable water has been a need in north Harris County for many years. Senate Bill (SB) 1909 would put the responsibility and control of this issue in the hands of those who will pay for it - the people of north Harris County.

Sen. Jon Lindsay has introduced SB 1909 to create a regional water authority, which would have the responsibility to develop and execute a plan for providing a long-term source of potable water for all of unincorporated north Harris County. This entity would be required to work in conjunction with the Harris-Galveston Coastal Subsidence District, develop long-range plans for delivery of potable water to the area, examine all alternatives to current groundwater dependency, and implement the plan to reduce groundwater dependency.

Many water districts in north Harris County support this type of legislation, including the North Harris County Water Users Association (Water Users Association), a group of approximately 50 of the most populated and active utility districts in the north Harris County area.

The Subsidence District has had regulatory authority over all of Harris and Galveston counties since its inception in the late 1970's.

Over the years, there have been several plans for conversion to surface water, but, until 1986, north Harris County had never had a surface-water conversion date of any significance. The 1986 plan imposed a requirement to satisfy at least 80 percent of water demand from surface water by the year 2005.

Soon after the 1986 plan was adopted, there was an attempt to create Harris County Regional District Number 2, which would have encompassed a small area of north Harris County along the populated area of FM 1960, from Interstate 45 west to State Highway 249.

At the time, residents actively opposed creation of this taxing unit for many reasons. First, they believed that the size of the area to be included in the project was too small to be cost effective. Second, the proposed project did not solve a regional water supply problem. Additionally, there was no significant subsidence in north Harris County, and the projected lowering of the water table by the Subsidence District was not a realistic projection.

The District was, in fact, created by the Texas Water Commission in a split decision – but the measure was defeated by a vote of 7,000 to 1,000 in a subsequent confirmation election.

In 1992, the Subsidence District revised its plan, accelerated the surface water conversion date for north Harris County to 2002 and delayed the conversion date for west Harris County to 2005.

Subsidence and water table decline in west Harris County are significant and verified by the Subsidence District's own measuring equipment. The decline is largely due to the operation of 94 City of Houston water wells in six well fields, from Spring Branch to Jersey Village to Alief.

The Subsidence District believed that the north Harris County area should convert to surface water first, since it was closer to the source of surface water, Lake Houston. As a result, two groups came forward with plans to build what was then estimated to be a \$600 million surface water-conversion facility, as projected by the City of Houston.

A third group, the Water Users Association, was instrumental in causing the Subsidence District to re-examine the 1992 plan, a revision which has not been completed in almost two years. The main goal of the Water Users has been to plan for and ensure a long-term supply of potable drinking water for the north Harris County region.

Prior to this legislative session, there was growing concern that another attempt from outside the region to control surface water delivery would be made. At press time, a proposed bill from the City of Houston would put the City in total control of surface water projects, including cost and timing in exchange for payments of about \$35 million per year from almost all districts in the ETJ and a 15 year annexation moratorium for districts which cooperate with the city.

Why create a new government? As proposed in SB 1909, the three most compelling reasons for taking this action are (1) local control, (2) to fix current problems efficiently, not build a monster project tomorrow, (3) to remove a city argument for annexation and, (4) cost control.

Each of several earlier attempts were conceived by interests outside the region, with the plan to solve the problem by automatically building a multi-million-dollar project. With locally elected directors focused on ensuring a long-term supply of potable water, any project would come from internally driven need rather than from externally imposed reasons. Local concerns of cost and timing would be under local control.

The district would also be able to participate meaningfully in regional drought planning required by SBI (See related story, p. 4).

In the recent annexation of Kingwood by the City of Houston, one of the most often stated reasons for the annexation was that "residents of the City's extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) do not contribute to large capital projects like they should, particularly large water projects." Another rationale offered by the City is that had Houston not been

on surface water, the City would have had to continue to drill wells northward and to deplete the aquifers earlier.

The proposed district would be able to handle long-term water needs for the area. Whatever the solution, long-range planning for a reliable source of quality potable water is critical to long-term growth in the area. The Regional District would be required to perform long-term planning so the region could remain self-sufficient in water needs.

The district would not replace districts currently operating or curtail the powers of those districts.

All political rhetoric aside, now is the time to solve the problem, which has not been resolved for more than 10 years.