

Opinion

San Antonio Express-News

Is rural Texas San Antonio's next endangered species?

Rural Texas could be next endangered species

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October 26, 2014 | Updated: October 26, 2014 1:09pm

San Antonio's chambers of commerce and real estate developers undoubtedly agree with SAWS that Texans who want to conserve and protect the Central Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, especially its Simsboro formation, should refrain from criticizing the largest turnkey groundwater project in state history.

When the City Council began its review of the project, state Rep. Lyle Larson labeled our opposition to projects such as Vista Ridge "un-Texan."

Perhaps they are nervous because we understand the scheme behind taking our aquifer, our property rights and values, and our future for an ill-conceived, \$3.4 billion, 489 billion gallon water-supply project (50,000 acre-feet a year for 30 years).



We have a simple message for the real estate lobby driving the council to vote by Thursday: Grabbing your neighbors' water to fuel unbridled growth outside of San Antonio is morally bankrupt.

To back its claims of broad support in Bureson County, SAWS represents that 3,400 groundwater leases are dedicated to the project, with the inference that 3,400 landowners will receive Vista Ridge royalties.

More than one analysis of the leases listed in the contract have revealed that both numbers are inflated and misleading. In fact, Vista Ridge wells will pump most of the water the state has determined is currently "available" for removal from the aquifer under all of Burleson and Milam counties.

An estimated 1 percent of the two counties' population will benefit from selling their water to Vista Ridge, as well as their nonleasing neighbors' water, in an aquifer that does not observe property lines.

A pittance will be returned to local communities under leases with cleverly worded royalty formulas while ratepayer money lines the pockets of SAWS' "partners" — a Spanish conglomerate, water speculators, investors and an irresponsible groundwater district.

Raiding a neighbor's water like a greedy bully and privatizing a water supply risks San Antonio's national reputation for stellar conservation and its residents' ability to afford living in their city.

Ratepayers should remember they rejected another public-private grab of our groundwater by SAWS and Alcoa more than 10 years ago. Neighbors for Neighbors, a grass-roots coalition of Central Texas environmentalists, farmers, ranchers, rural-to-urban commuters, urban dwellers, elected officials and local businesses, joined with San Antonio ratepayers and environmentalists to defeat that contract.

San Antonians dealt a blow to the same special interests they had defeated twice before in connection with a proposed reservoir.

We commend mayoral candidate state Rep. Mike Villarreal for suggesting a postponement of the council's vote until after the 2015 mayoral and council elections. SAWS' objections to delay are red herrings. The real motive for rushing the deal emerges from SAWS' response to issues raised by members of the council.

SAWS answered "no" to Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales' astute question about whether the water could be left in the ground until San Antonio actually needs it. The reason for that answer is plain and simple. Instead of a brilliant plan for drought, SAWS has negotiated a contract to become a regional water marketer by depleting our aquifer and buying water the city does not need yet — if ever.

Ratepayers should demand an independent review of a contract under which SAWS has deliberately obligated ratepayers to pay up to \$2,343 per acre-foot of water as early as 2020. Otherwise, Vista Ridge water will fuel the kind of development SAWS and developers intend and most urban planners reject.

Should SAWS encourage urban sprawl over the Edwards Aquifer by peddling another community's water to San Antonio's extraterritorial jurisdiction and to unincorporated areas in Bexar County and beyond?

The notion of "if you build it (water infrastructure), they will come (in-migration)" is emblematic of the failed California model of abusing distant water supplies to foster unnatural growth patterns. The council should wait for the city's *planning commission to determine if SAWS planners' design for Vista Ridge is good for San Antonio — or just good for the good ol' boys.*

SAWS gave no satisfactory response when Councilman Rey Saldaña broached the subject of instituting, prior to the vote, a progressive rate structure to soften rate increases for new water projects.

Vista Ridge alone may require at least a 16 percent increase. Ratepayers should demand this action, but SAWS is caught in a conundrum that effectively prevents it from committing to any timetable for rate review.

Regional customers for an uncertain and interruptible water supply have not come forward to assist SAWS' plan to temporarily "offload" very expensive Vista Ridge water. SAWS had no idea how much cost ratepayers will have to absorb when it approved the contract. More important, how will San Antonio rationalize signing a contract to pay billions for new water to serve an occasional need when it has also pledged to save at least 5 billion gallons of water a year through conservation?

The folly of Vista Ridge illustrates why I am now a volunteer for the League of Independent Voters of Texas, a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization.

Our mission is to extend the "urban-rural citizens' coalition" model across Texas. Voters must be empowered, across the partisan divide, to take back our state — as well as your city and our water — from special interests. We demand accountability from government, sustainability of natural resources, and affordability to remain in our homes.

Ratepayers, tell the council to abandon one more San Antonio water debacle. Our "Remember the Ogallala" should become your "Remember Applegate, Alcoa — and Vista Ridge."

Michele Gangnes is also a founding board member of the League of Independent Voters of Texas and Neighbors for Neighbors.



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