

LCRA OKs pipeline for western Travis

By Kevin Carmody

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Opponents of a drinking water pipeline to serve new subdivisions on Hamilton Pool Road once again had the numbers on their side, except those that mattered most — the votes of the Lower Colorado River Authority board members.

Nearly 300 people packed the Terrace Club in Dripping Springs on Tuesday, with a clear majority asking the river authority to postpone the pipeline project for a second time in six months to allow regional

planners more time to enact stricter development rules. This time, however, the 13 board members present unanimously approved the \$5 million project in western Travis County.

During three hours of emotion-charged comment, pipeline opponents and backers characterized the board's vote as pivotal to the long-term environmental fate of much of the Texas Hill Country.

Several board members said they were swayed by concerns that the region's already

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strained groundwater supplies might be further compromised by new wells if the river authority further delayed the project. Others said they thought the added environmental safeguards, which the developers must accept as a condition of receiving the piped lake water, meant that building the pipeline was the best of the imperfect options available.

"If you've ever had to shoot your own dog, you'll appreciate the emotional level associated with this issue," said Connie Granberg, the board's Blanco County representative. "Population growth is beyond the LCRA's control, but providing the infrastructure associated with this growth is part of our mission."

The board's vote authorized its staff to execute water service contracts with three landowners and prepare the budget authorizations needed to build an initial pipeline extending up to seven miles west of Bee Cave.

The three developments total about 1,200 acres with about 730 houses; a fourth developer with 356 acres is in negotiations with the river authority.

Rebecca Hudson, whose proposed 468-unit project has been the most closely scrutinized and criticized, said she was glad her patience in accepting the six-month delay in the spring was not in vain.

But LCRA General Manager Joe Beal said Tuesday's vote was about far more than three residential projects.

About 15 landowners with 13,000 acres have expressed support for or have in eventually tapping into that pipeline when it's extended farther west, Beal said. And the river authority recently drafted a 30-year, \$225 million plan to lay pipelines, build drinking water treatment plants, and extend surface water service into the Hill Country west and north of Austin.

By taking the initiative in providing water service throughout the environmentally sensitive region, the river authority will be able to impose stricter environmental

standards — such as limits in density and added buffers along streams — than would otherwise apply, Beal told the board.

Before the vote, leaders of neighborhood group representing about 3,000 people asked the board to once again delay the decision and provide more time for regional planners to complete work that may establish even stricter antipollution standards than those the river authority will require.

For example, the Regional Water Quality Planning Group is examining tighter rules for the unincorporated areas of the Barton Springs watershed and by February should have its plan ready for local governments to consider, project leader Terry Tull said.

Beal, in a final appeal to the board, said he was encouraged by the progress reported by the regional planning initiatives but recommended against waiting for their completion.

"If we wait, I am confident we will be replaced by others who would provide water in this

area," Beal said.

Opponents also questioned whether the draft water service contracts provided adequate water quality safeguards, considering that Travis County officials, not the river authority, will be mainly responsible for enforcing the rules.

"Although the enforceability may not be perfect, the option is no enforceability of any water quality controls at all," Beal said.

The board also heard residents of existing subdivisions, and several ranch families, plead for the river authority to build the pipeline and deliver a reliable supply of drinkable water — something they said does not exist today and will only get worse as more wells are drilled.

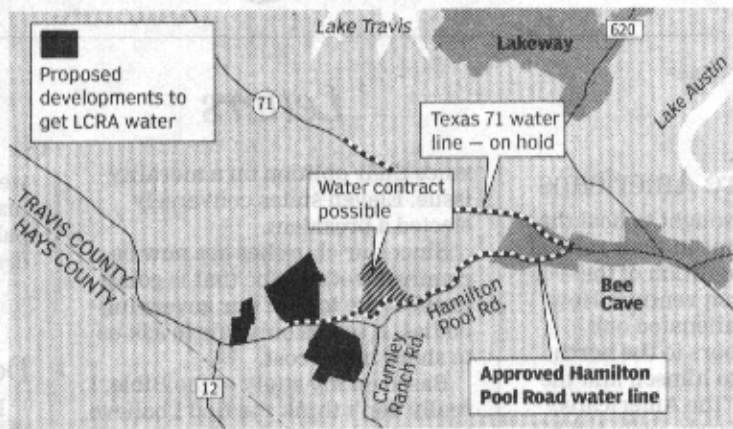
Sam Hammett, who runs the system serving 250 residents of the Deer Creek Ranch subdivision, said the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has deemed the groundwater supply "not fit for human consumption" without extensive treatment.

A well that had been a reliable supply for drinking and

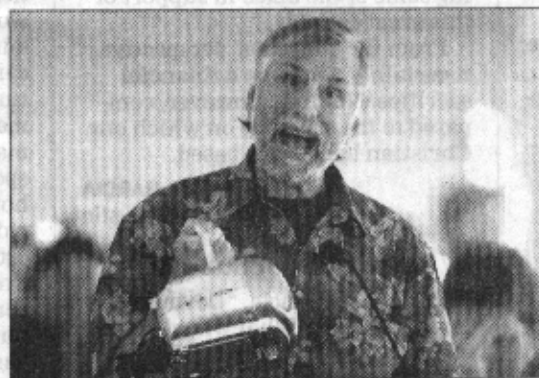
agricultural use for 50 years ran dry last summer, said William Biggs, whose family ranch once also included Hudson's tract. "We had to drill a new well."

Meanwhile, subdivision residents expressed dismay that the river authority's current plan would require 80 percent of existing subdivision residents to sign on before getting service at a connection cost of about \$10,000 per home.

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Ric Sternberg sings his opposition of the water pipeline to the Jimi Hendrix song "Hey Joe" during the LCRA meeting Tuesday.

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