

Residents near creek don't want wastewater plant to intrude on country living

Sunday, April 06, 2008

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The signs of change in southern McLennan County are apparent in the survey tape hanging from the trees over Bull Hide Creek.

They signal the beginning of urban growth that soon could change the rural community surrounding it forever.

The development has been inching its way south on Interstate 35 from Waco for years. But it has been stifled recently in Lorena, where growth has outstripped the city's infrastructure.

However, real estate developers eyeing the city say it is destined to become the area's latest suburban enclave if only certain utility services are available.

Workers have surveyed and performed an environmental analysis along Bull Hide for months, but many area residents say they had no knowledge of what was being planned for their figurative backyard until recently. That information didn't come out until a group of area cities sent out letters notifying residents of its plans to build a sewer plant on the creek that many consider a community treasure.

As officials from the Waco Metropolitan Area Regional Sewer System explained at their first public meeting March 20, Waco and surrounding communities are nearing their infrastructure's capacity, forcing them to seek sites to build new plants.

The Bull Hide plant, designed to process 1.5 million gallons of wastewater per day, would serve part of Hewitt and all of Lorena. Meanwhile, WMARSS is planning \$20 million worth of expansion projects at the central treatment plant in Waco, which will add another 5.5 million gallons per day of processing capacity.

The new treatment plant is especially important for Lorena, which is already feeling the consequences of a maxed-out sewer system. The burgeoning city has had a de facto moratorium on development since it was forced to stop issuing sewer hookup permits in June 2006.

The city is under an enforcement order from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to fix the problem by February 2010.

Rural-urban divide

Residents along the creek, only 2 1/2 miles east of Lorena on Farm-to-Market Road 2387, rely on septic tanks and would not likely receive a direct benefit from the new sewer plant.

The situation sets up a classic conflict between the interests of city dwellers and country residents, who in some ways live worlds apart despite their increasingly close proximity.

About 100 concerned residents met at the Levi Water Supply Corp. office Monday to trade information about the plant and talk strategy on how to stop it — or at least prevent it from permanently marring their rural lifestyle.

Charlie Montgomery, who lives on 3 acres adjacent to the 233-acre tract the city purchased to build the plant, has helped lead the opposition, although no formal organization has been established.

He says residents along Bull Hide Creek are there to live the “simple life.”

“You’ve got a creek running through here. It’s quiet,” he said. “You go outside and you don’t hear traffic all the time. You don’t hear a lot of things you hear in the city. You come home, and you are able to relax a lot better.”

Montgomery, who works in construction, understands that development follows utility lines, so he is warning his neighbors about what might be in their future, including small-tract housing and increased traffic.

But with the possibility of a wastewater treatment plant moving next door, area residents have more immediate concerns. Although WMARSS officials say many of the fears are unfounded, residents say

they are worried that the plant could smell, contaminate their drinking water and reduce property values.

Possible misconceptions

Wiley Stem, a Waco assistant city manager and the WMARSS board chairman, said he understands that treatment plants have a stigma associated with them, but he believes that is mostly based on misconceptions.

“It’s a wastewater plant, but technology has come a long way,” he said. “We believe we can do this in a very acceptable way for the stakeholders around there.”

Ricky Garrett, Waco director of utility services, said WMARSS can’t guarantee that the plant will never smell, but he said it would be rare, because solid waste would not be processed at the plant.

“As an operator, we have every incentive to make this plant a model neighbor, because if the region keeps growing and prospering, which is in everybody’s best interest, there is every likelihood that in 10 or 15 years, we might need another plant like this in another part of the county,” he said. “The last thing we need is an example of where it didn’t work well.”

Despite assurances from WMARSS officials that the Bull Hide treatment plant would discharge water at least as pure as the creek’s current quality, residents’ fears have not been assuaged.

Janet Brodine said she doesn’t want to see her dream of living in the country ruined by the plant. In December, she and her husband purchased a home off Bull Hide Trail across the creek from the proposed plant site after living in Waco.

“I’d like that creek to be here for my grandkids when they come,” she said. “But I’m not going to let them go down into that water” if the plant is built.

John Voss, who lives downstream of the proposed plant site, said it’s scary to think about whether the quality of the water he pumps from the shallow well in front his house would be affected.

“They don’t care that I water my goats and my gardens with well water,” he said. “I consume the vegetables. I guess that doesn’t matter.”

Neighbors feel out of loop

Many who attended Monday’s meeting complained that they were left uninformed about the proposed location of the plant until after WMARSS closed on the sale of the property March 14.

Stem said it was necessary for the system to obtain rights to the land before it could begin the process of getting the plant permitted by the TCEQ. Since that time WMARSS has sought public input on the site and attempted to answer questions about the plant.

Montgomery said area residents were not given a choice on the location of the plant.

“That is the problem with our government nowadays,” he said. “We are like puppets. They tell us everything — how we are going to do it and how we are going to live — and that’s when people start saying enough is enough.”

WMARSS officials say there are only a certain number of locations in the county that have the topography, buffer area and discharge points needed to build wastewater treatment plants.

“We get the question about why we didn’t put it where there wasn’t anyone,” Garrett said. “Well, out in the county, where is that exactly?”

Location, location, location

Bull Hide area residents also question why the plant wasn’t built in Lorena if the city is in such need for adding capacity. Garrett said WMARSS looked at that option but determined it to be “extremely expensive” and complicated.

Lorena City Manager John Moran said growth in southern McLennan County, including the Hewitt area, made Bull Hide Creek a desirable location for a treatment plant even without Lorena’s involvement in the project.

“I understand the argument that ‘I moved out here to get away from the subdivisions,’ ” he said. “There is nothing anyone can say to that. But there are intangibles that may come along with this that nobody is foreseeing that could be positive benefits.”

Moran said area landowners could actually see their property values increase if wastewater service is available. WMARSS officials have said that landowners whose property is adjacent to the pipeline leading to the plant would be able to tie into the system. That would in turn allow landowners to subdivide their property.

Regardless, building a new treatment plant is critical for Lorena to grow, said Moran, who has had to ask several developers to wait on large projects until the wastewater capacity issue is solved.

Developer Rick Sheldon, who owns 240 acres at the northwest corner of the FM 2837 and Interstate 35, says he plans to build a multiuse project there that would feature signature bridges over Interstate 35 similar to those he developed in Kyle, Texas.

Sheldon said the project is still three to five years off, but when the new Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center opens at the intersection of West Loop 340 and Interstate 35, it will change the “whole dynamic” in Lorena.

“We’re five miles from the new hospital,” he said. “We are going to get tons of doctors and medical-related folks to move to Lorena where they can just drive five miles down the road to go to work.”

Stem, Waco’s assistant city manager, said growth is inevitable, and everyone affected by it should help manage it.

“We are approaching this on a more reasonable planning cycle than getting in an emergency, we are certainly saving a lot of money and we are making sure Waco and the surrounding communities are positioned to grow,” he said.

But Montgomery and others living around Bull Hide Creek say they are planning to stand firm even as development continues its advance through the countryside.

"We're not just looking out for us right now," he said. "We have to look out for the future of our kids."

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