

Hewitt city officials table moratorium on new home construction

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The Hewitt City Council is weighing a temporary moratorium on new subdivisions to prevent further strain on its sewer system.

The fast-growing suburb is getting close to overloading its sewer system as it waits for the construction of new lift stations and a controversial proposed treatment plant at Bull Hide Creek. The council met Monday but agreed to table the moratorium proposal until Sept. 15, so city officials could discuss other options with developers.

"It's something that has come to a head," said Paul Holroyd, Hewitt community services director. "We knew that at some point, we were going to start experiencing some difficulties. At this point, we're not experiencing overflows, but we're trying to take some action to see that doesn't happen."

Homebuilders were taken off-guard by news of the proposal Monday. The proposal would allow construction to continue on projects that are already under way, as well as the one residential subdivision currently in process at Hewitt City Hall. Commercial and industrial permits would be approved on a case-by-case basis, depending on sewer capacity.

"It could make a huge impact on people developing out that way," said Kay Vinzant, executive officer of the Heart of Texas Builders Association. "We want to see if we can sit down and come up with a better solution."

Holroyd said the city doesn't want to halt construction but has run into obstacles in building the infrastructure to get Hewitt wastewater to the regional sewer system for treatment.

Currently, a lift station along Interstate 35 pumps most of Hewitt's waste north to Waco for treatment. Hewitt is planning to rebuild that lift station and expand another lift station that would reroute some of Hewitt's flow south to the new Bull Hide Creek plant, which the regional sewer system is hoping to build.

However, the lift station plan is stalled as Hewitt awaits word from the Texas Department of Transportation on its expansion plans for Interstate 35. Meanwhile, neighbors along Bull Hide Creek in Lorena are fighting the plan for a sewer plant, creating uncertainty about that project. Holroyd said construction probably won't begin on the plant until at least late 2009.

Interim City Manager Don Davis said the timeline for those projects should become clearer in the next few months.

"It might be years," Davis said. "Once we know about the plant permit, that will make this whole process a lot easier."

But Bull Hide Creek residents said the sewer plant won't be built in their backyard without a lengthy legal fight.

"That will take 10 years at best," said Hal Pledger, one of three Bull Hide Creek sewer plant opponents who showed up at the meeting .

Anthony Tomchesson, an engineer who has been working with developers on two proposed projects totaling 56 lots in Hewitt, said he hopes the city will approve developments that are already in the planning stage.

"What I think is going to happen is that the ones that are in line are going to be grandfathered," he said. "But any future project is going to be dead."

Builder Woody Butler has built and sold 75 homes in his Imperial Estates subdivision on Sun Valley Drive and has preliminary approval for the next phase of 52 homes. He was worried Monday that the city could force him to wait another two or three years to build on the new lots, but city officials assured him that his project would not be affected.

"I'm very thankful to the council," he said, adding that he still will participate in discussions between the city and developers.

Vinzant said she was encouraged by the willingness of the council to seek input from the development community. She said one temporary solution would be to build pump-and-haul facilities, which are essential giant sewer tanks that have to be emptied by trucks. Hewitt city officials say the city probably can't afford such a system, but Vinzant said the idea should be on the table.

"No growth is a bad solution," she said. "We can't put a hold on growth."

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