

March 24, 2015

Short-term water means long-term serious consequences for the Hill Country

RE: "3.4 billion water pipeline could supply more growth in the Hill Country," Austin American-Statesman, March 22, 2015.

The Vista Ridge water project in San Antonio threatens to follow a dangerous precedent: draining water from one region to another in a way that will only increase exurban sprawl in the Hill Country. If this solution seems familiar it should: it's the California model that has led to that state having one year of water left.

The Vista Ridge pipeline is a multi-billion dollar project to pipe 50,000 acre feet of water a year, 142 miles across five counties. That is hugely expensive infrastructure, especially considering there is no assurance about how reliable this groundwater supply will be for the long haul. Aquifers are not unlimited resources.

This is just one of many proposals to pump and pipe water from the Carrizo Wilcox aquifer. It's one thing to assess the impact of a single project over the next decade or so, but groundwater runs freely beneath several counties and several groundwater districts with differing management plans. We don't have the science needed to demonstrate the cumulative effect of developing this much water long-term. Unless we manage groundwater withdrawals in a way that takes no more than nature can replenish, we will deplete the resource. Then what?

San Antonio has managed to successfully grow at a steady pace and at the same time reduce water consumption with forward-thinking proven conservation strategies.

SAWS openly states they won't need this water for many years to come, so to help pay for this pipeline, they are looking for customers along the way, which is prompting eager developers to jump at the opportunity for short-term profits. One question is how will these new subdivisions continue to provide water for new residents when their contracts are up and San Antonio decides it needs the water?

Flash back ten years—the LCRA seemed invincible as they obliged developers with water lines west of Austin. In the end, that hotly debated infrastructure proved to be unsustainable. LCRA divested itself of the failing water systems, and water is now scarce for the new developments they facilitated which have actually increased groundwater pumping and pollution. This is a cautionary tale.

Those of us who opposed the water lines ten years ago argued that we needed to plan for growth rather than fuel unmanageable growth. For the Hill Country Alliance (HCA) and others who would like to see a more sustainable future, serious questions demand answers before any of these water lines take another step forward.

SAWS isn't kidding when they say "game changing" water project. Texas is unique in that we don't have basic rules about land use and land development outside of our cities. The intensity, location and type of

development that occurs in unincorporated areas is currently not planned but happening anyway at alarming rates.

Piping large volumes of water to rural lands will change the landscape from rural to suburban and exurban. With no rules in place there is little oversight on how this development should occur. Density, wastewater management, water quality, transportation systems, scenic views, ranchland protection, cost of schools and public safety, impact on existing tax-payers — these important issues are not being considered comprehensively.

We submit that a better way is possible and that protecting the Hill Country is worth it. A multi-jurisdictional regional plan could determine what areas can accommodate large densities and what areas need a more conservation minded approach. Water infrastructure could be planned in concert with other infrastructure needs in a consolidated, conservative and affordable way. To do so, counties would need to be given land use and land development oversight. Any path forward must include a guaranteed commitment to water and land conservation.

“The Hill Country is a beautiful area with limited surface water, limited groundwater and no big city to spread rates across,” Robert Puente of SAWS stated. “We would answer the desperate call.”

We agree with the first part of Mr. Puente’s statement, but do not hear that “desperate call.” In fact, we believe most people of the Hill Country want thoughtful appropriate growth that is compatible with our region’s unique qualities. We must plan to avoid California’s fate. Texas can do better.

Christy Muse is the Executive Director of the Hill Country Alliance, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to protect the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. www.hillcountryalliance.org.