

Dallas council decides not to fund planning of controversial reservoir

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By RANDY LEE LOFTIS / The Dallas Morning News

Stirred by a congressman's strong words, Dallas City Council members said no on Wednesday to becoming a partner in a proposed northeast Texas reservoir – at least for now.

Council members said they would not vote to spend \$600,000 to pay the city's share of planning for the Marvin Nichols Reservoir, which water planners are pushing as a future water supply for urban North Texas.

After hearing nearly every council member speak against the idea and hearing U.S. Rep. Max Sandlin, D-Marshall, declare the project politically dead, City Manager Ted Benavides said he would not place the item on next week's agenda.

The council's objections were a major victory for northeast Texas landowners, timber companies, environmental groups and others who have fought the Marvin Nichols project for three years.

Environmentalists told the council that numerous options could supply Dallas' future water needs without the habitat loss and local disruptions of building the 100-square-mile lake on the Sulphur River, about 150 miles northeast of Dallas.

But it was Mr. Sandlin, whose district includes the proposed lake site and the existing northeast Texas reservoirs, who seemed to make the difference for the council.

Mr. Sandlin said Dallas would be foolish to spend money on Marvin Nichols, now or later. The project is so reviled in northeast Texas, he said, that the proposal is doomed – something he said he has made clear to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which would have to issue a permit.

"There's no reason to cause these problems for a lake that's not ever going to be built," Mr. Sandlin said. "We see the entire project as pure folly, as a waste of taxpayers' dollars.

"You just might as well burn that \$600,000."

Several council members said the congressman's stand was enough to settle the issue.

"That's pretty unambiguous to me," council member Gary Griffith said.

Council member Bill Blaydes concurred.

"Why do I want to spend \$600,000 for a study on water when I have a member of the U.S. House of Representatives standing before us and saying, 'Friend, that baby ain't going to get built?'" Mr. Blaydes asked.

Not all the council members were ready to shut the door on Marvin Nichols, which is the controversial linchpin of a state-mandated regional water plan for urban North Texas.

Several said they feared that Dallas might be shut out later if other options – such as tapping existing reservoirs and cracking down on water waste – don't work out.

Council member Ed Oakley, who said he favored spending the money, warned that Dallas would have to pay up now if it wanted a voice in the planning – or a share of the water.

Council member Sandy Greyson said she shared that worry, though she added that she opposed spending the money now.

But Mr. Sandlin said fears that other participants would shut Dallas out were unfounded. "When you show up with a check, you get a place at the table," he said.

The feasibility study on Marvin Nichols is a joint effort of the Sulphur River Basin Authority and major public water systems in urban North Texas.

Robert Johnson, Dallas' water chief, said the city has been a nonvoting, nonpaying partner until now and apparently would keep that status.

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