

East Texans voice concerns at water planning meeting

By COLLEEN MARTIN, The Daily Sentinel

Thursday, July 14, 2005

Conserving the environment, the need for conservation in the place of construction, and preserving bottomland hardwood habitat were among the concerns of more than 50 East Texans who were in attendance at the second of three hearings by East Texas Regional Planning Group on initial draft of the 50-year regional water management plan held Wednesday evening at the Nacogdoches public library.

The Planning Group serves all or parts of Anderson, Angelina, Cherokee, Hardin, Henderson, Houston, Jasper, Jefferson, Nacogdoches, Newton, Orange, Panola, Polk, Rusk, Sabine, San Augustine, Shelby, Smith, Trinity and Tyler counties.

A brief summary of the report was given by Gary Graham, project manager and primary consultant with Schaumberg and Polk. He highlighted each county and shared the proposed water plans the next 50 years, and comments were presented by those attending.

Most speakers seemed to be concerned about the proposed Lake Fastrill south of Rusk and Rockland Reservoir, near Rockland, both on the Neches River.

Elyce Rodewald said she was concerned about the proposed reservoirs, and she wanted to know what to expect over the next five years.

"There are lots of alternatives besides building in bottom land hardwood habitats," she said. "We need to concentrate on conservation."

Areas of concern were preserving the environment of East Texas, and attendees spoke of the need for conservation rather than building more reservoirs that would inevitably change the ecology of the area. Many spoke about the preservation of the bottom land hardwood habitat and the Neches River for later generations.

Representatives from various environmental groups were on hand, and each had ideas on why the proposed reservoirs would be detrimental to wildlife.

Dian Auriett, chairwoman of the Piney Woods Sierra Club, said, "Not only do the farm lands, historical sites and state parks need to be preserved, the cost to the taxpayers is not needed. Conservation is the answer."

Many speakers were concerned with the growing pressure from Dallas for the East Texas region to provide water for the DFW metropolitan area.

Expressing the need for conservation, Gina Donovan, director of the Neches River Protection Initiative, said the people of Dallas use 240 gallons per person, per day compared to San Antonio and Austin residents, who use 155 gallons per person, per day.

"Lufkin uses 120 gallons per person, per day," she said. "That is a huge difference."

Many speakers said Dallas needs to learn to conserve instead of continuing to build reservoirs that will hurt Texas in the long run.

"Our job is to identify water management strategies. We identify the needs of the region and forecast the amount of need," David Alders of Nacogdoches, chairman of the executive committee with the East Texas Water Planning Board, said. "It is the job of the group to make a forecast in planning, but if it is found that our plan is not built on an accurate information, we have the next six months to address any problem in planning or a substantial public outcry."

Public testimony can be given at the last hearing to be held at 6 p.m. today at the Jefferson County Courthouse in Beaumont. Written testimony may be submitted within 60 days. Copies of the water plan will be placed in each county courthouse in the county and in a library in each county. The plan may also be accessed at <http://detcog.org/ertwpg>.