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River plan still up in air

GREG BOWEN

Victoria Advocate

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SAN ANTONIO - Some seven long hours of sometimes contentious discussion by water planners racing the clock to put finishing touches on their updated regional water plan ended with no decision on whether to keep the controversial Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project in the plan.

After Thursday's meeting, representatives of the project's sponsors, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and the San Antonio River Authority, expressed confidence that planners will retain the Lower Guadalupe project in the new regional plan. Planners meet in a scheduled final session on Dec. 1.

But a representative of Victoria's D.M. O'Connor Interests, a ranching and financial powerhouse long opposed to the project for environmental and economic reasons, urged planners to drop the project from the updated plan.

The updated regional plan will outline the water projects and water management strategies that will keep the 21-county region from east of Victoria to west of San Antonio supplied with water for the next 50 years.

A Sierra Club representative also asked planners for the state's South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group to consider whether it would be appropriate to allow the Lower Guadalupe project to remain in the plan given the recent changes it has undergone.

The version of the Lower Guadalupe project included in the current regional water plan calls for Guadalupe River water and underground water from the Victoria area to be piped to San Antonio, where water shortages are looming.

But in August, the project's major partner, the San Antonio Water System, dropped out of the \$962 million project, saying it was too expensive and carried environmental risk factors.

In response, GBRA announced last month that it was going to develop options for a reconfigured Lower Guadalupe project that would meet the long-term needs of the rapidly growing I-35 corridor portion of GBRA's service area.

GBRA also announced at that time that it would remove the controversial underground-water-withdrawal component of the project, which had been seen locally as a threat to existing water wells.

The O'Connors responded by asking that the project be removed from the regional water plan, a move that would kill the project by ending its chances for state funding or permits.

At Thursday's meeting, O'Connor representative Mary Carter of the Houston environmental law firm Blackburn Carter told water planners that too many questions remain about the revised version of the Lower Guadalupe project, including whether more water would be taken from the river during critical times of drought.

She said including the new version may violate state rules and asked for additional study and

analysis on the revised project.

Tyson Broad of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club told planners that the water-planning process is supposed to involve "careful analysis of strategies."

He said that adding a significantly altered project to the regional plan at this late date in the planning process does not allow the planning group, its consultants or the public adequate time to fully investigate the proposal.

Broad also asked planners to consider whether the revised Lower Guadalupe project is necessary given another proposed GBRA water project, announced Wednesday, that would move groundwater from the Simsboro Aquifer in east-central Texas to the river authority's I-35 corridor service area - the same area that the revised Lower Guadalupe project would serve.

Greg Rothe, general manager of the San Antonio River Authority, said he believes planners will include the reconfigured Lower Guadalupe project in the regional plan "because (GBRA) still has the demands in its basin that have to be met from somewhere."

He said the just-announced Simsboro project is too new and lacks the necessary technical analysis to support putting it into the regional plan.

In addition, he said, the original version of the Lower Guadalupe project was to have brought additional water supplies to Bexar County - beyond the water that would have gone to SAWS.

"We've got to find a surrogate supply to replace that before I can say we don't need the project," Rothe said. "We've got to meet that demand from some source."

GBRA General Manager Bill West said he believed the long discussions on the unresolved aspects of the regional plan kept planners from making the decision Thursday to put the revised Lower Guadalupe project into the new regional plan.

But West said he was confident that the planners would take that action on Dec. 1.

After Dec. 1, the proposed updated regional plan is scheduled to be turned over to the planners' technical team for preparation for submission to state officials to meet a January deadline.

State officials will combine the regional plan with similar plans now being developed by other water planning groups across Texas to fashion a statewide water plan.