

Comal County, Texas, Grapples with Rapid Development, Critical Water Situation

Knight Ridder Tribune Business News (KRTBN) (January 21, 2002)

Jan. 20--NEW BRAUNFELS, Texas--Some residents recall when German was spoken widely here and the bake shop owner wouldn't sell to strangers.

But in Comal County circa 2002, the Old World, small-town feeling is largely a memory. The new reality is urbanization, and the big question is what else to do about it.

By some accounts, the county's steady population growth -- from 20,000 in 1960 to 80,000 today -- is under control now that stringent development standards are in place. But many believe San Antonio's northward sprawl threatens Comal County's unique identity, as well as its water supply and the natural beauty that makes it one of Texas' favorite playgrounds.

Indeed, the same county that boasts the Guadalupe and Comal rivers, Canyon Lake and Schlitterbahn Waterpark Resort also has subdivisions where water is delivered in tanker trucks because wells aren't adequate.

"We do have a critical water situation in Comal County," said County Judge Danny Scheel.

"We're doing everything we possibly can to control our destiny and protect ourselves from the big guys."

"We've got to put all of this together to preserve our natural resources -- and the ambiance of the community -- to make sure that we leave something here for the future generations, so they can enjoy it the way we did," Scheel said.

A fifth-generation resident whose great-great-great grandparents were among original settlers in 1845, Scheel remembers when "you went to the post office and if you didn't talk German you were in trouble."

Those were days when, outside of New Braunfels, the county consisted of a few giant ranches, all but one of which has been subdivided. San Antonio was 30 miles away, not nudging against the county line with developments such as the proposed PGA Village.

Big changes swept the region in the 1960s, when Interstate 35 was completed and Canyon Lake was created, attracting permanent and temporary residents. A new wave of settlers flocked to the hilly communities of Bulverde and Garden Ridge, all in commuting range to San Antonio, San Marcos and Austin.

By the mid-1990s, county leaders were pleading with rural residents to incorporate their scattered subdivisions to deter big-city annexation. When San Antonio's extraterritorial

jurisdiction grew to within a few hundred paces of a key Comal County intersection, Scheel said rural residents became alarmed enough to incorporate areas that originally attracted them precisely because they weren't incorporated.

By incorporating large areas of south Comal County, "we closed the hole. We now have a wall from Boerne all the way to Seguin. San Antonio cannot come out any further," Scheel said.

"There's houses there that you can touch standing between 'em. My vision for the future is not to have Comal County like that," Scheel said.

"I don't have a problem with people coming in, as long as they respect and preserve our heritage," Scheel added.

In 1997, the county began requiring homesites with septic tanks to be at least 3.17 acres instead of 1 acre. Even so, Scheel said he was caught off guard when two subdivisions calling for more than 1,000 manufactured homes were proposed near his residence, impacting already-crowded schools and roads.

Commissioner's Court imposed a moratorium on subdivision development. After gathering community input for several months, officials revamped development rules to require a 5.1-acre minimum for homesites with water wells and septic tanks. New limits also were imposed on concrete and asphalt cover to allow more water runoff to recharge the Trinity and Edwards aquifers.

"We're just head and shoulders above the other counties in the way we're trying to control our growth," Scheel claimed.

Developers "have to give us certified information, signed by an engineer, that they have enough water under that development to service the subdivision -- at full build-out -- for 35 years," the county judge said.

Comal and other counties near big Texas cities need more regulatory authority to limit spillover sprawl, said state Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, whose district includes New Braunfels.

"They're doing the best they can, but they need more authority. We've returned some of the authority to them (counties) but we're going to do more in 2003," he said.

"The good news is, more and more people who used to oppose this sort of authority for county commissioners court now have seen the explosive growth and see the need for it," Wentworth said.

In the meantime, Scheel believes regulatory efforts have put the brakes on development.

"It seems the developers are heading now to counties that don't have all these stringent development rules and what we've done is slowed the growth down, which was our original goal," he said.

Scheel, a Republican, faces GOP re-election opposition this year. He has some bipartisan support for the growth-control initiatives.

"There are continuing efforts to regulate and help development and this community has done a very good job of it," said Comal County Democratic Party Chairman Atanacio Campos.

"The growth issue is one that we are constantly looking at," he said.

Hispanics made up 23 percent of the county population in 2000, non-Hispanic whites constituted 75 percent and 2 percent were of black or other racial background, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Like those of German ancestry, some Hispanic residents trace their local roots several generations -- to times when the two predominant communities didn't mesh as well as they try to do now.

"We have a past history of overt racism in this county. I can't say that it exists today. To have that kind of reputation is not well-deserved," Campos said. For example, Campos, who serves on the board of New Braunfels Utilities, said his and other entities that influence growth in Comal County have diverse representation.

County Commissioner Cristina Zamora, the lone Hispanic, female and Democrat on the court, said she is proud of the steps taken to constrain growth.

"There's no doubt" development rules may discourage newcomers with low-income, but racism was not a motive, she insisted.

"Our population is growing so much, so fast, there had to be something done to ensure we had enough water availability," Zamora said.

On that front, Scheel said he is especially concerned about land sales over the Trinity Aquifer that could give San Antonio access to its coveted water by buying it from developers and piping it to the city.

"We're trying to find a way to prevent this," Scheel said.

Meanwhile, farther north, strong and sometimes competing demands are being placed on Canyon Lake, he noted. Residents around the lake want a constant water level, while downstream, anglers and tubers want a high and steady flow -- both of which can't always happen during floods and drought.

Nor is there enough lake water to quench other parts of the county, Scheel said.

"Bulverde is the most critical because they actually have subdivisions where they are -- as we speak -- hauling water to try to sustain that subdivision," he said.

"The wells can't keep up with it anymore. I have people saying 'Give us water! We live in Comal County, too!'" the judge said.

Those concerns follow a long tradition in Comal County, said former County Judge Carter Casteel, who presided from 1991 to 1998.

"There has always been in Comal County the east versus the west. There were people in the county who said nobody paid attention to Bulverde. Nobody paid attention to Canyon Lake," she said.

Now they are all heard, she said. A short list of their most important concerns includes education, water, taxes and land use, Casteel said.

The former educator, a Republican in what she calls an "overwhelmingly Republican county," is among several candidates for a newly drawn Texas House district that arcs over San Antonio and includes Comal, Bandera, Gillespie and Kendall counties.

Casteel said one of the best features of Comal County's diverse heritage is its continuing emphasis on schools. New Braunfels, she noted, is home of the first public school in Texas, founded in 1845.

"We have had a long history of being proactive. I'll give credit to all three of the major (racial) groups that are here," she said. "They have always been conservative, but they have not been blinded about the future."