

Austin City Council approves water deal with LCRA

100-year water supply agreement will double the city's take from the Colorado River.

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The Austin City Council on Thursday voted 6-0 to approve a 100-year water supply deal with the Lower Colorado River Authority.

With one stroke, the pact turns two opponents on water resources into (water) bedfellows.

Under the agreement, Austin will end its opposition to the river authority's expansion of service, and Austin and the river authority will work together to free up water supplies and dole them out.

The deal also promises water to the city down the line, when a current contract between the LCRA and Austin runs out. The new agreement would nearly double the city's take from the Colorado River to 188.9 billion gallons annually, an amount the city calculates will quench its water needs through the year 2100. No payment to the LCRA is required at this point.

The city and the river authority say the deal is crucial to meet the population growth of Central Texas and is instrumental in ending the possibility of expensive litigation or meddling by the state Legislature in regional water issues.

Some environmentalists, however, are uneasy about what they call a marriage between the city and the river authority, which they blame for enabling sprawl in the Hill Country. And for at least the next dozen years, the deal would effectively prohibit the city from buying water from competing suppliers, thus limiting Austin's ability to diversify its sources of water.

In October, the Save Our Springs Alliance, the chief critic of the deal, argued that the agreement would make the LCRA "as Austin's water master" and asked the City Council to start the water planning process again with more public oversight.

SOS also asked that language be inserted into the agreement that the city is "(a) in no way giving up its right to object to future LCRA water sales, especially large sales in the Hill Country and/or outside the Colorado River basin; and (b) is not agreeing to assist or cooperate with LCRA in delivering raw or treated water into the Hill Country."

"There's no real commitment to openness and involving public in water planning," Bill Bunch, the head of SOS, said in an interview today. And, he added, the water agreement has little to say about conservation, which City Council Member Lee Leffingwell has promoted as a panacea to Austin's water supply problems.

Leffingwell on Thursday moved to add several provisions to ensure public participation, including requirements for open meetings and public comment. Council Member Betty Dunkerley was off the dais during the vote.

But the city says the deal is above-board. Over the past couple of months the water agreements have passed through several city boards, including the environmental board and the resource management board and the water and wastewater commission. Some of those boards asked that more public input be folded into supply decisions the water partnership makes and that each party has independent rights "to refuse to approve a particular recommendation from the Water Partnership for a Supply Decision."

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