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Between the Lines by Greg Little

WATER ALWAYS EVOKES PASSION

There's probably not a more controversial subject in Gonzales County than water.

In many parts of this country, water is something taken for granted. You turn on your tap, it comes out and you pay your bill at the end of the month. That's about as much as some people think about water.

But in the sprawling state of Texas, things are much different.

I find it fascinating that in a state with such land mass, urban sprawl is becoming a huge issue. I did some internet research the other day and found that seven of the largest 50 cities in America are in Texas.

And the forecast for the future shows nothing but continued growth in Texas.

The reasons are vast as to why Texas is growing so fast. Having lived in the far northern United States, I can tell you one factor is the weather. Living in cold climates is not fun, no matter what the heartiest people in North Dakota say.

A bustling economy and progressive thinking are other reasons for this growth.

And all of that leads to the fact water is such a huge issue.

People are moving to the metropolitan areas and those people have got to have water.

I had an interesting education last week about the water situation involving San Antonio and directly related to Gonzales County.

I learned the Texas Legislature passed a law concerning the Edwards Aquifer in San Antonio. That law says the aquifer can only be drawn down to a certain level. With the exploding growth in San Antonio, it means that someday, the Edwards Aquifer will no longer be able to meet the city's needs.

I also learned that underneath Gonzales County lies four aquifers. It seems pretty clear we have a lot of water underneath the ground in Gonzales County.

It doesn't take a hydrologist to figure out that if we have a lot of water and San Antonio doesn't, the folks in San Antonio are going to look our way to get the resource they need.

And therein lies the debate.

It's a passionate debate, for sure. It's really not that difficult to see both sides of this issue. The people in San Antonio have a big problem and are trying to figure out a way to get it solved.

The good folks of Gonzales County have a huge resource and when it come to resources, they are passionate in their feelings.

Of course a major player in this situation is SAWS, which is the San Antonio Water System. Just that name evokes emotion around these parts. They are seen by many as the evil empire wanting to bring their death star to Gonzales County.

It's an understandable perception.

Anytime you have an organization like SAWS seeking to get something from the "rural folks," it causes hard feelings. That's not even an arguable point.

One thing I did learn is that SAWS is sort of a "quasi" government agency. It's one of those "autonomous" entities, with members appointed by the San Antonio City Council. Yet it appears the city council really doesn't have a lot of say in the matter when it comes to that board.

I have dealt with such boards in the past. And I have done battle with these boards. They always make me nervous because they claim to be this separate organization, but when the lawsuit hits the courtroom, it's the main government entity which is standing there with the checkbook - using our money.

Another factor which I learned about SAWS could be the most important for everyone concerned. It's the power of emanant domain.

I have never really been a big fan of emanant domain, although I do understand it can be necessary from time to time. Emanant domain was most widely used in this country when the interstate highway system was built starting with the Eisenhower Administration. It was necessary to find places to build these roads and obtaining the land from private citizens was the only method available.

It's truly a "big brother" perception, and probably rightfully so.

But to think that SAWS has the power of emanant domain is something which should make everyone step back and consider. I don't know the lengths that SAWS can go when it comes to that power, which is something that should be on the front burner.

Can they simply come to Gonzales County and declare what land they are going to use to get water out of the ground? This is a huge question for everyone who lives in this county.

I also know another fact that isn't directly related to SAWS, but will eventually have a big influence on the final decisions which are made.

That fact is population centers everywhere in this country have the most elected representatives in state legislatures. It's indisputable because representatives are based on the amount of population in various areas.

What that translates into is votes.

I dealt with this issue on a larger scale while living in Montana. Ironically, the issue was about water - specifically the Missouri River.

The folks in Montana wanted to make sure the reservoirs were kept at adequate levels so that people could continue to recreate - a huge part of the state's income.

But the people in the "downstream states," like Iowa and Missouri, wanted the water released to help out the barge industry. It was a battle raged in the United States House of Representatives.

Who do you think won the battle?

Today, those upstream reservoirs are at record low levels while the barges continue to travel downstream.

It's something to think about as this issue of water moves forward in south central Texas. There are some huge decisions which have to be made on the local level. It will take a lot of thought and level-headed discussions to make sure the right decisions are made in the long run.

It's not an easy subject, for sure. But it is important. It will be interesting to see how all of this plays out in the future.

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