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Not enough water for growing population

By Dave Pasley - Staff Writer

Too many people and not enough water.

That was the message delivered by speakers at a Texas Water Symposium attended by about 75 people Thursday at the Boerne Community Center.

Unfortunately for the crowd, which seemed sympathetic to the premise but yearning for direction, the speakers articulated many concerns and offered few solutions.

Sean Garretson, president of Pegasus Planning in Austin, said flatly that the projected population growth in the Hill Country was unsustainable.

Garretson said 800,000 people lived in the Hill Country in 1950 and by 2000 the population had increased to 2.6 million.

By 2030 he said the population was projected to increase to 4.3 million, and he said there is not enough water to support that population.

The area he defined as the Hill Country includes 17 counties from heavily-populated Travis and Bexar counties on the east to sparsely populated Edwards County on the west, Uvalde on the south and Burnet on the north.

Chad Norris, an aquatic biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and an expert on Texas springs, said there is a dearth of information about many of the state's springs and that increased pumping of groundwater could either dry up some entirely or could alter the characteristics of many so drastically that the diverse flora and fauna that depend on them could become endangered.

As groundwater conservation districts such as the local Cow Creek District wrestle with determining how much water can be pumped from aquifers during the next 50 years, Norris cautioned that spring flows could be compromised by pumping more water for the growing population.

Garretson's data-focused presentation was interspersed with snippets of anecdotal commentary from Bebe and Mary Fenstermaker, sisters who for years have fought off attempts to develop through or around their nearly 1,000 acre Maverick-Altgelt Ranch in Bexar County.

The property the pair and a third sister, Sissy, inherited sits in the middle of San Antonio's growth corridor. The property is south of Boerne in the far northwest corner of Bexar County, between Highway 16 and Interstate 10.

Not long after the property had passed into the hands of the sisters in the late 1980s, the Texas Department of Transportation began construction of FM 211, a four-lane, median-divided highway that was strongly backed by then-San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros. The plan was for FM 211 to link U.S. 90 and I-10, effectively becoming another loop road around San Antonio, beyond Loop 1604. The segment from Highway 16 to I-10 was planned to go through the Fenstermaker's ranch.

But that didn't happen.

The sisters successfully blocked the road and beat back attempts to get the the right-of-way from them by eminent domain. With varying degrees of success the Fenstermakers have been fighting development projects near the ranch ever since, including a rock quarry, power transmission lines and a flood control dam.

"We inherited a conservation ethic from our parents along with the ranch," said Bebe Fenstermaker. "I don't think previous generations would believe how hard this generation would have to fight to preserve this land."

Development pressure is not the only thing the Fenstermaker sisters have fought. They've likely passed on dozens of opportunities to make millions of dollars developing their property or selling it to developers. Instead they settle for grazing cattle and accommodating so-called eco-tourists.

But many landowners across the 17-county area Garretson defined as the Hill Country have not been able to resist the monetary allure, selling out to developers who, in turn, divide ranches measured in hundreds and thousands of acres into acreage tracts often measured in single digits.

"We're killing the goose that laid the golden egg," Garretson said.

He noted that the Hill Country had been listed recently as the number one tourist destination in the United States by The New York Times and that the area tended to attract recently retired couples whose number will soon increase dramatically as the baby-boom generation begins to retire.

But when the questions came from the audience about how to resist the development pressures the panel had little to offer.

Garretson mentioned long-discussed proposals to give counties development controls similar to cities, but he admitted that the prospect that the Legislature would extend those powers was slim. Furthermore he did not explain how, if counties did have city-like powers, that would change the problematic growth patterns when growing cities like San

Antonio and Austin themselves have sprawled into sensitive Hill Country areas on their fringes.

Garretson also mentioned that some states have imposed growth boundaries, forcing development to occur incrementally, adjacent to existing cities, instead of in the scatter-shot, fragmented manner that has come to define modern-day Texas.

But the prospects of such growth boundaries gaining approval in the Legislature were virtually nil, he said.

“Texas is run a lot like the wild, wild west,” Garretson said.

The Texas Water Symposium is a partnership between Schreiner University, Texas Tech University, Texas Public Radio and the Hill Country Alliance.

Thursday’s event was the first in a series of four free lectures and forums that will be conducted in the next six months.

Organizers say the events are designed to inform Texans about water and water planning. A similar series of four symposiums was conducted last year.

“Complex issues, require complex solutions and an informed public is needed to make informed decisions,” said moderator Robert Potts.

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