

Abilene's future water needs mulled

Special to the Reporter-News

Posted August 5, 2010 at 10:51 p.m.

<http://www.reporternews.com/news/2010/aug/05/future-water-needs-mulled/>

It could be 20 years before the city of Abilene builds a new reservoir to supply water for its future, and City Manager Larry Gilley and Water Utilities Director Tommy O'Brien say there are no identified sources of financing for its construction.

Gilley said if the City Council decides to build the reservoir, financing could come from several sources, including the city of Abilene, state and federal governments, bonds, low-interest loans, grants, and contributions from future partners.

Of the city's role, Gilley said, "We will have some responsibility for the cost or some portion of the cost."

O'Brien added, "How we're going to pay for it, it's hard to say."

Despite Gilley's prediction that the proposed reservoir is far in the future, some people fear it might be built sooner. And, they argue that it isn't needed. Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance, a statewide organization that earlier this week placed a full-page advertisement in the Reporter-News, called the reservoir, "a boondoggle." She said reservoirs are overbuilt in Texas.

"The official projection is that Abilene won't need more water than it already has," said Bezanson, a native of Brownwood.

Bezanson said the expected increases in demand for water from the city of Abilene "are earmarked to cool steam-electric plants in Nolan County, and it's not reasonable to ask the people of Abilene to pay for this."

She said if a need does develop, officials should look for other options "rather than asking the taxpayers of Abilene to pay for it."

Since March 2005, when an agreement was signed by the city with the Brazos River Authority and the West Central Texas Municipal Water District, the proposed Cedar Ridge Reservoir has been included in Abilene's water plan. Estimates of construction costs range from \$215 million to \$285 million.

The reservoir proposed for Shackelford and Throckmorton counties was presented by city staff to the City Council in 2008 as the best option for supplying water in the city's future.

"The city has been looking at future water needs for quite a while," O'Brien said, "and the council then said to move forward."

O'Brien said the staff determined that it is more cost-effective to build Cedar Ridge Reservoir than the other primary option of purchasing water from Possum Kingdom Reservoir, considering the initial investment, operating costs and long-term debt.

Last year city officials said that "the timeline for the reservoir to actually be built is in the distant future, sometime from 2030 to 2060 and beyond, at which time the City Council determines the reservoir is needed to meet water needs."

After engineers determined in 2009 that the site of the proposed dam in Throckmorton County needed to be moved upriver, the permitting and application process began. The City Council still must authorize the actual filing later this year of water rights applications now being prepared for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and next year with the federal government.

O'Brien said it could take up to eight years to get the necessary permits because of any additional information required by the TCEQ, hearings, and reviews by federal and state agencies.

"It could take us until 2018 to get the permits to build," he said, "and it's still the council's decision to build."

The reservoir is included in Plan 2011 recently adopted by the Region G water planning group (also commonly referred to as the Brazos G water planning group), which includes officials from a 37-county area of the Brazos River watershed.

The group, chaired by Jones County Judge Dale Spurgin, finalized its plan July 21 at a meeting in Waco. It is one of 16 regions in the state that are presenting plans to the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) by Sept. 1 to complete the state's overall Plan 2011 by the end of this year.

Each region revises and updates its water plans for the TWDB every five years.

In the Brazos G plan, the needs for the city of Abilene and its wholesale water customers increase from 40,076 acre feet of water for 2010 (27,239 treated water and 12,837 raw water) to the 50-year projection for 2060 of 58,441 acre feet of water (26,604 treated water and 31,837 raw water).

(There are about 325,851 gallons or 43,560 cubic feet of water in one acre-foot of water.)

"They have determined a need (for more water), and that's what has kept us moving forward," Mayor Norm Archibald said of the city's plans.

O'Brien said the need for water for steam-electric power generation in Nolan County has been added to the plans of Region G since Plan 2006 was adopted. He said that need comes from recommendations by the Bureau of Economic Geology, which forecasts the need for energy plants across the state of Texas and their resulting water needs.

"They said in Region G this is where we think you will need plants, and this is how much water we think they will need," O'Brien said. He said the plans do not identify any end-user of the 20,000, such as

Tenaska, AEP or another power generating company. (Energy development company Tenaska, Inc., has announced plans to build a coal-fired power plant in Nolan County.)

"It could be located elsewhere," he said, "but right now that's what is in the plan. And Abilene is the larger city that someday most logically would supply that demand."

Gilley told the Reporter-News in an interview earlier this week that potential partners with the city of Abilene in the reservoir project could include a power company. "It wouldn't necessarily be a burden on the people of Abilene," he added.

Customers of the city of Abilene as a wholesale provider of water include the cities of Baird, Clyde, Lawn, Merkel and Tye; water supply corporations in Eula, Hamby, Hawley, Potosi and others; and West Texas Utilities, which currently is the largest customer other than the combined residents and businesses in the city of Abilene.

The Region G plan for 2010 includes 22,891 acre-feet of water for the city of Abilene and 11,837 for West Texas Utilities from the total demand of 40,076 acre-feet. By 2030, the need for water for power generation in Nolan County becomes the second largest customer at 20,000, ahead of the same 11,837 for WTU, with a total demand of 59,892 (including 23,507 for Abilene). Cedar Creek Reservoir is expected to provide more than 23,000 acre feet of water per year.

The Brazos G plan projects the population in the 37-county area to increase to 3,448,879 by 2060 (the estimate was 3,332,100 in 2006) and the need for water to increase to 615,483 acre-feet per year by 2060 (the estimate was 595,482 in 2006).

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