

Reservoir plan focus of Gilmer public hearing

Longview News-Journal, 10-31-02

By GLENN EVANS

GILMER - The proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir did not fare well at a public hearing Wednesday for water planners who are considering demoting it on the proposal they'll send to Austin next month.

The Clarksville City Council didn't do so well either, and neither did acting Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff, R-Mount Pleasant, who consistently has said Dallas/Fort Worth has the political muscle to build the 62,000-acre lake with or without input from Northeast Texas.

"If we fight it and we don't develop it and we get run over by the Dallas/Fort Worth area coming over and developing it themselves, we lose," Ratliff said from his home, adding the lake agreement assures this region one of every five gallons yielded by the new lake.

During a two-and-a-half hour meeting in Gilmer filled with criticism of the lake, Clarksville Mayor Ann Rushing probably would have liked Ratliff's company. Her brief statement in support of the lake drew the only jeers from the crowd of about 120. Rushing was the only lake supporter at Wednesday's public hearing. Her delivery of a Clarksville City Council resolution supporting more lake study before its status is changed in the Region D plan drew hisses and boos.

The Northeast Texas Water Planning Group, representing the 19-county Region D under the 1997 state water law, is considering demoting the Sulphur River lake from "proposed" status to that of a "potential" site.

The water planning group, one of 16 created statewide under the 1997 Senate Bill 1, will vote whether to change its plan on Dec. 5 in Mount Pleasant. The 78th Legislature is charged with compiling the 16 regional plans into a state master plan when it convenes in January.

"I wouldn't want it delayed, I want to see it killed - period," fifth-generation Red River County resident P.C. Abernathy, 81, told the water planners in the Gilmer Civic Center, drawing the afternoon's first applause.

Marvin Nichols Reservoir, proposed south of Clarksville in Red River County, is one of two sites given the top designation "proposed" in the plan Region D is submitting to the Texas Water Development Board. But the other site, 2,300-acre Prairie Creek Reservoir west of Longview, is being discouraged by the Sabine River Authority as too expensive for the small water yield that's expected.

Marvin Nichols is envisioned by neighboring Region C as a future water supply for Dallas. It grew from a 1998 agreement between Regions C and D that says the Dallas area will take water from the Sulphur River while Region D concentrates on the Sabine.

"Dallas/Fort Worth has sufficient water, and will have all the water it will ever need from existing sources," James Presley of Texarkana said. "With little effort, it can pipe in all it will ever need without raiding its neighbors, whose ancestors were here before Dallas was more than a pimple on the prairie by the Trinity (River)."

Presley and others criticized the Metroplex as too lazy to enact conservation practices that could save it about the same amount of water as is projected from Marvin Nichols. They said the cities there could pull more water from lakes already owned by Tarrant and Dallas county water corporations, and they said Dallas should more aggressively pursue water reuse and desalinization projects.

Richard Williams of Longview, chairman of the North American Hardwood Preservation Society, said Dallas uses twice as much water as San Antonio. "There is a huge difference between 'needs' and 'wants,'" Williams said. Opposition arose to the lake as word of Dallas' plans, which include a 140-mile pipeline to deliver the water, trickled down to area residents, environmentalists and the timber industry. The latter group is particularly vocal about estimates the lake and its mitigation, or set-aside, land will remove more than 400,000 acres of timber from the field.

The anti-lake movement was bolstered in August when four state lawmakers and U.S. Rep. Max Sandlin, D-Marshall, wrote a letter asking the Region D planning group to put the project on hold until the lake's effect on timber, agricultural, environmental and other interests can be determined. Absent from the all-Democrat Northeast Texas Delegation that wrote Region D was Ratliff, the Republican representing Northeast Texas in the Texas Senate.

"Mr. Bill Ratliff and some other locals seem eager to sell us out, ignore us and not represent us," Cass County Commissioner Max Boone said. Wednesday's speakers didn't like Ratliff's insistence that the Metroplex will take what it wants.

"When they do that you become a second-class citizen," Robert Canfield of Bogata said. "You have no one to represent you." Reached at home later, Ratliff said the Dallas/Fort Worth contingent in the legislature had wanted the 1997 bill to include all of North Texas in one region. Ratliff said he convinced that contingent to support a separate Region D.

"But the deal was Region D couldn't adopt a plan that Region C couldn't agree on and vice versa," Ratliff said. "That being the case, I don't know any way Region D can go back and change the plan without Region C's acquiescence. When they get to the point that they feel they've got to have more water, they are going to have enough political clout. And it doesn't matter if it's me or anybody else representing Northeast Texas, they'll be able to come and get this water."

The Dallas Morning News quoted Region C officials in September saying removal of the lake from the Region D plan would have "no impact" on Region C's intentions.

And Ratliff was skeptical the opposition was as widespread here as opponents say.

"I think it's a rather limited group of people who have been able to create an impression of a groundswell," he said. "But the vast majority of the people in Northeast Texas, in my opinion, would support the creation of that reservoir."

Ratliff also has been criticized because his name appears as a partner of the engineering firm hired to develop the project. He said he sold his interest in the firm in 1989, adding his son has not worked since around 1992.