

LCRA vote may be key in future of Hill Country

Board set to decide today on water pipeline to Hamilton Pool Road

By Kevin Carmody

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

There is some agreement between backers and opponents of the proposed Hamilton Pool Road water line: Today's vote by the Lower Colorado River Authority board could well signal whether the Hill Country is paved or saved.

The adversaries in this emotionally charged debate just differ on which scenario will play out west of Austin if the 15-member board approves water service contracts with three landowners who are planning subdivisions, effectively approving the \$5 million water line project and clearing the way for later extensions.

Hill Country residents who in May persuaded the river authority to delay the pipeline's approval for six months, to allow time for regional planning initiatives to establish stronger environmental safeguards, say they'll plead for an extension of that unprecedented moratorium today.

Those regional initiatives, along with a Travis County project to beef up its development ordinance, won't be complete until next year.

Anything less than another moratorium will spur a speculative development boom by Hill Country landowners, said Christy Muse, one of the opposition leaders. Currently, those landowners don't have reliable access to groundwater, making dense development difficult.

LCRA General Manager Joe Beal said Monday

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that his recommendation to approve the contracts will require the three projects, and all others served later, to comply with pollution control rules far more stringent than otherwise possible.

Escalating development of the Hill Country, Beal said, is inevitable with or without the water lines, and the best hope to limit environmental damage is the strings his proposal will require.

"We think we have found a

unique solution to protect the environment within this area while providing good, basic water utilities out here that this population will eventually need," Beal said.

Muse and others say they intend to question whether the environmental conditions in the contracts can be adequately enforced, noting that some of the enforcement duty falls to Travis County, which has no say in the contracts' approval.

The proposed developments with contracts on the table today total about 1,200 acres, with

about 730 houses proposed, river authority spokesman Robert Cullick said. Ten other large landowners along Hamilton Pool Road have expressed support for or interest in tapping into the pipeline when it's extended farther west.

The board's vote will be preceded by about three hours of public comment. The meeting begins at 2 p.m. at the Terrace Club, 2600 E. U.S. 290 West, just east of Dripping Springs.

The elected officials calling for another delay include Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin,

and Austin City Council Member Daryl Slusher.

"Your decision could be the most important factor in the future of this portion of the Edwards Aquifer, Barton Springs and other creeks and streams that are the lifeblood of the beloved Hill Country in this region," Slusher said in a letter Monday to the river authority board. "A vote to extend the pipeline before adequate protections are in place puts the Hill Country in great peril."

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