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WIRE

'Similar to the wild, wild West': Clearwater could incorporate western Williamson County into groundwater district

BY SHANE MONACO | TELEGRAM STAFF

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Keith Elliston, president of the Aquifer Conservation Alliance, talked at the 21st annual Bell County Water Symposium Wednesday about why his group wants the Clearwater Underground Water Conservation District to annex the western half of Williamson County.

Shane Monaco | Telegram

BELTON — Managing underground water may soon become easier for one local entity as the resource doesn't follow political boundaries.

Annexation of land in western Williamson County by Belton-based Clearwater Underground Water Conservation District was one of many panels held at Wednesday's 21st Annual Bell County Water Symposium in Belton.

The annexation would bring Williamson County residents west of Interstate 35 under the supervision of the groundwater conservation district. Residents in the proposed area have already formed the Aquifer Conservation Alliance to push for the annexation.

Keith Elliston, president of the alliance, told attendees that residents and home developers in the fast-growing western half of the county want to join the district so existing underground water can be conserved.

"We have laws in Williamson County but we have no law enforcement," Elliston said. "Texas law allows for these ground water conservation districts to be in place to protect our groundwater resources, but for probably about 50 years we could have had a (district) looking over these groundwater resources but none was ever established."

Elliston was joined on the panel by Vince Clause, a hydrogeologist who works with Clearwater, Cole Ruiz, general counsel for the district, and Kristen Fancher, legal counsel for the alliance.

The alliance was began this year after Elliston and neighbors in Liberty Hill saw an increased number of rock crushers, which are used for drilling wells, in their community.

Elliston said he, and others in his group, are concerned that the almost unregulated well drilling in the county. He said heavy use of the resource could cause wells used by residents to dry up more quickly than expected.

An increase in the number of wells in Williamson County is supported by data provided by information gathered by Clearwater.

Clause said that, since 2004, Bell County has drilled more than 1,100 new wells with many located to the southwest part of the county. In contrast, he said that just the western portion of Williamson County saw 1,800 wells drilled in the same time period.

Clause echoed what Elliston talked about, regarding a lack of groundwater regulation in Williamson County.

“The thing that I like to think about is that these are all people who have drilled water wells, in (a manner) I feel is similar to the wild, wild West,” Clause said. “(They’re) drilling without regulations.”

Clause said that water conservation districts, such as Clearwater, are set up to manage the use of groundwater and are the preferred tool used by the state.

Water conservation districts, Clause said, make sure people who buy a home with a well or drill a new one can expect water in the future.

“What this is really saying is, at the end of the day, groundwater conservation districts are in place to protect investment backed expectations,” Clause said. “As a well owner, you have an investment backed expectation when you drill a new well.”

Clause said conservation of groundwater also related to surface water, as the two interact through landforms such as springs.

Annexation of the land in Williamson County, Clause said, would also help regulate groundwater in Bell County.

Annexation

Elliston said annexation by another county’s conservation district was not his organization’s first choice.

In the beginning, Elliston said, he and others were interested in starting their own conservation district but ran into many obstacles. One such issue was that, three of the four ways for a county to come under a water conservation district include some form of politics.

In Texas, Fancher, who handles many water-related issues, said that about 99% of all water conservation districts are created by a bill in the state Legislature.

“Another dynamic that you deal with is that local bills that would, in this case only affect one portion of a county, can be hijacked in the legislative sausage-making process,” Fancher said.

Elliston said the group also abandoned creating their own water conservation district due to the average time required for one to be set up.

Officials said that water conservation districts in the state can take 12 years from when they are first passed in the Legislature to when they are operational.

Western Williamson County, Elliston said, doesn't have 12 years to wait as it remains one of the fastest-growing areas of Texas.

In contrast, under Clearwater, Elliston said the conservation district could start work much faster if the area is annexed.

“We would be operational in months, not years,” Elliston said. “After this annexation election, we would be able to come in and start seeing success right now. (Well) owners would get water level checks, landowners would get water quality checks and work would be done to make sure the spacing and depth of wells is done in a thoughtful way.”

While there are multiple water conservation districts bordering western Williamson County, Elliston said he and his group specifically chose Clearwater.

The alliance chose Clearwater due to its long history in working with residents, programs that it offers and its fiscally conservative nature.

Process

Once the Aquifer Conservation Alliance submits its request for annexation, which is expected later this year, Clearwater will be required to hold two public meetings before voting on the item.

If the request for annexation is approved by Clearwater, which could happen in January or February of 2023, annexation would then go before voters in May.

Residents in the affected area would then need to decide if they would like to join the district, which would come with an increase in property taxes.

Ellison said he expects the additional taxes imposed by Clearwater would be as small as \$10 to \$15 annually for residents. He said he thinks this is worth the protection of the county's future.

"When you do the math, what we are asking for what the county could do with one-fifth of one percent of their annual budget," Elliston said.

Officials said the tax rate set by the district would cover any costs related to the new area, and would not heavily impact Bell County residents.

If annexed, officials said, they expect new seats on the water conservation board would be added with an election to fill those positions held next November.

Elliston said some officials in Williamson County are already on board, with city council members of Liberty Hill already looking forward to programs offered by Clearwater.

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