

ROUND ROCK

Williamson commissioner: Why the county needs a groundwater conservation district

Terry Cook Special to Round Rock Leader

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On March 9, the Aquifer Conservation Alliance of Williamson County announced it had withdrawn its petition for annexation by the Clearwater Underground Water Conservation District of Bell County.

The combination of wells going dry from the pressures of development and industries, the absence of any type of drawdown monitoring or conservation practices for the Trinity Aquifer and the drought have all combined to negatively impact wells in Williamson County. Many residents are facing tremendous costs for drilling deeper and deeper wells.

By 2021, 1,775 wells were registered in western Williamson County. Most of those wells serve homeowners, but also municipalities and ranchers. For rural local industries, aggregate mines and batch concrete plants are the primary users of wells. It's the "Rule of Capture" in Texas, and "he who gets to the water," that allow unlimited well water draw outside of the protective monitoring by a groundwater conservation district.

Across Texas, approximately 99% of the rural population gets their fresh water from groundwater via wells. Groundwater accounts for 30.8% of the freshwater on this planet, whereby surface water such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs account for only 0.3%. Our creeks and rivers are largely the result of groundwater surfacing along their water basins. It was surprising to find the number of springs and weeps our construction contractors, Chasco, encountered when building the .933-mile stretch of the Brushy Creek Trail that traverses the pedestrian bridge in Round Rock just north of Round Rock Avenue. Without groundwater, those streams would cease to exist. Then where would our municipal wastewater treatment plants send their output? How would life in nature be sustained?

Rural landowners do not benefit from the ordinance and land use planning of municipalities. The Legislature has not granted county government those tools to manage growth – it's really the wild, wild West. If you've got money, that land is yours.

So, neighborhoods in the unincorporated areas of Texas have seen concrete batch plants move next door with 400 heavy trucks per day driving by their homes and destroying their narrow, low-load county roads. The same is true for the number of active aggregate mines, of which Williamson County leads Texas. Besides that, there's no limit as to how much free water is pulled from the aquifer for these businesses. Don't even think about the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality as help; it is a permitting agency, not an environmental protection organization.

The Legislature gave authority to groundwater conservation districts to develop scientific information on the region of an aquifer within that district and to develop a plan, reviewed annually and updated as necessary, to protect that aquifer. The science is then applied to requests for new drilling permits with projected water demands. It helps determine the impacts of additional draws on the existing availability of groundwater, and the groundwater conservation district is granted the power to say "no" to new applications if it is deemed adverse conditions would result. This is an enormous benefit to the local homeowners, ranchers, farmers and businesses. It is a scientifically based power unavailable to county government in managing growth. Ultimately, the need is to protect the groundwater resources while protecting the economic viability for all groundwater users.

Currently in Williamson County, our western area is in a state of moderate drought while the eastern region is abnormally dry, according to the Texas Water Development Board. But to our south and west, the counties of Hays, Comal, Kendall, Blanco, Bandera and Medina are suffering under exceptional drought conditions. The majority of our western region wells in Wilco are tapped into the Trinity Aquifer. It doesn't recharge at nearly the rate that the Edwards Aquifer — also serving part of Williamson County — does, but at only 4% to 5% of the rainfall. In times of drought, that's dire levels for any sustainability. One former elected official stated that the Trinity Aquifer is unreliable, then he added, "No, in times of drought, the Trinity is very reliable in going dry."

We are oversubscribed to groundwater in Wilco west of Interstate 35. We can't conserve our way out of this, but we really need a conservation district to understand and manage its use.

So why was Clearwater Underground Conservation District of Bell County sought to help regulate and conserve groundwater by the rural homeowners in Williamson County? First,

water knows no property or county lines. The groundwater is flowing into Williamson County due to the underground structures. Clearwater has a track record of sound scientific study and well-reasoned policies and, most importantly, is very effective in protecting the aquifer to the best of human capacity at a very low annual taxation rate. Clearwater could immediately study this western side of the county and develop and implement a master plan in short order.

So many new groundwater conservation districts fail to develop effective programs or take an enormous amount of time to get off the ground, train directors and put conservation plans in place. Clearwater is already established and knowledgeable, so joining this district would reduce or eliminate those delays.

Williamson and Travis counties are surrounded by groundwater conservation districts: Clearwater WCD north of us in Bell County; Post Oak Savannah GCD to the east in Milam County; Central Texas GCD west in Burnet County; Lost Pines GCD south of Travis in Caldwell County; Hays Trinity GCD SE of Travis County; and Blanco Pedernales GCD west of Travis County. We have over 700,000 residents now in Wilco with an average of 103 people moving here per day. Travis and Williamson counties are islands in the middle of regional water conservation efforts. It is past time for the citizens of Williamson County to implement a groundwater conservation district.

Terry Cook is county commissioner of Precinct 1, which includes most of Round Rock, most of Austin in Williamson County and part of southern Cedar Park.