

Dallas water plan due today

Long-range proposal includes new reservoir, to chagrin of critics

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By JIM GETZ / The Dallas Morning News

Every day in Dallas, Carrollton, Farmers Branch and two dozen other cities in the region, millions of people take showers, water their lawns, hose down driveways and do laundry without ever thinking about where the water comes from.

But the Dallas City Council must, because Dallas Water Utilities supplies them all: 2.3 million people in 27 cities, along with other water customers such as utility districts. The council's policy directions on the city's water sources over the next 55 years will affect residents, businesses and habitat from here to rural East Texas.

After months of study and weeks of public input, a city-hired consultant, Ed Motley of the Chiang, Patel & Yerby engineering firm, will today offer a long-range water plan for Dallas to consider.

It is a mix of conservation, water recycling, tapping into existing reservoirs and the opening of at least one new reservoir by 2060. The strategies chosen will affect water rates in Dallas, dozens of other cities, school districts and major employers, though it is impossible to specify those rates now.

"The two most reliable [sources] we can say are Palestine and Lake Fork," said Mr. Motley, referring to existing lakes to which Dallas will connect in the next decade. "Everything else on the list has a risk that it may not happen. We have tried to develop a plan for Dallas that contains those risks, so they can devise certain strategies."

Environmentalists say they can use Mr. Motley's figures to prove Dallas – and the cities to which it sells water – can get all it needs from existing reservoirs and never have to flood hundreds of additional square miles of rural land to quench the urban region's thirst.

Beth Johnson, who represents the Sierra Club and the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, said of existing reservoirs: "We consider these innocent until proven unworkable. ... We consider [new reservoirs] guilty until proven needed."

A joint meeting of the City Council's Finance and Health, Environment & Human Services committees will hear both sides today at noon. On Wednesday or March 9, the full council could then direct Dallas Water Utilities Director Bob Johnson on a mix of policies to follow.

Mr. Johnson wants to submit the city's plan by mid-March to a regional water planning group of 16 North Texas counties. That regional plan must become part of a state plan by year's end.

The city's joint committee was formed about a year ago, shortly after the full council declined to spend \$600,000 to study building the proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir, which would flood about 100 square miles in northeast Texas and put at least 200 more square miles off-limits to ranching and logging. That lake could provide Dallas with 100 million gallons a day of the 876 million gallons that Dallas Water Utilities says it will need in the mid-21st century.

Council members also want Dallas – one of the state's highest per-capita water users at 242 gallons a day for residences, businesses and industries – to embrace stronger conservation measures and explore recycling wastewater.

Two weeks ago, city officials outlined a water reuse plan that could eventually save the city 138 million gallons a day, about one-sixth of its future needs. There also is a related conservation plan under which the city would begin installing low-use systems in its own facilities, launching an intensive public-awareness campaign, enforcing code more strictly, and eventually offering water-saving devices to the public.

Mr. Motley and Mr. Johnson agree that conservation and recycling must be major components of a balanced strategy.

But unlike the environmentalists, they believe the strategies can fail. Future councils might not keep up the commitment to conservation, they might not want to finance building pipelines to places that could directly use wastewater, or they might balk at blending wastewater into reservoirs if the public worries about health issues.

For those reasons, they say, the city should keep its options open: It should participate with other water suppliers in a study of the Sulphur River Basin to see about Marvin Nichols and other reservoirs, and it should not close the door on the proposed Fastrill Reservoir south of Lake Palestine. Those options, they have calculated, ultimately could be cheaper than water from existing reservoirs.

But Ms. Johnson says the consultant and Dallas Water Utilities are fudging projections to justify a new reservoir.

She contends the difference in supply and demand will be minimal. If you subtract savings from conservation, she says, that reduces future demand to 824 million gallons a day. If you count all anticipated sources except new reservoirs, Dallas will have 804 million gallons of supply. That leaves only a 20 million-gallon gap.

"Dallas loses more than that every day through leaks," Ms. Johnson said.

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