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Letters to the editor: County must reject 'facts' of SJRA, LSGCD

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To the editor:

I recently came across a brochure put out by Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District entitled "Facts about Groundwater Resource Management in Montgomery County." The very first statement in the brochure caught my eye. It says "Facts — not fear or false information — must drive the management of groundwater resources underlying Montgomery County."

This platitude brought to mind the fear-mongering claims of San Jacinto River Authority when it was promoting LSGCD's "solution" to groundwater issues in 2009. Back then, a press release from the then SJRA General Manager Reed Eichelberger ominously stated that "Montgomery County's growth is running the well dry." "Dry!" he cried. He said the county was facing a "critical water shortage."

Current SJRA General Manager and LSGCD board member Jace Houston followed this shrill pronouncement with one of his own in a lengthy tome called "Montgomery County's Groundwater Crisis." There, Houston claimed "we are literally draining the Montgomery County well dry," and said that growth had created an "overwhelming demand that our underground water supply cannot sustain." Based on this alarming "fact," LSGCD has decreed that only the amount of recharge in the county may be produced from the ground, and that absolutely no water in storage may ever be used for water supply.

The inconvenient truth for SJRA and LSGCD is that Montgomery County has more groundwater in storage today than all the surface water lakes in all of Texas. The Texas Water Development Board, cited and relied on by LSGCD in its glossy brochure, estimates that there is 180 million acre feet of groundwater in storage under Montgomery County. Faced with this number, LSGCD hired a mouthpiece called Intera to — wait on it — opine that the TWDB numbers are horribly wrong. But according to its brochure, LSGCD used TWDB hydrogeologists to "guide the District in its effort for long-

term planning to meet the water needs in the county.” So, TWDB is all right until it’s all wrong? So much for “facts — and not fear or false information.”

But getting past LSGCD’s own brand of fear-mongering, the question becomes whether the joint scheme of SJRA and LSGCD to restrict groundwater production is necessary or worth the cost. As to necessity, other hydrogeologists have estimated that Montgomery County can use all the groundwater it needs through the year 2070 and only reduce the water in storage by 1%. If that’s the case, LSGCD’s draconian limits on groundwater use are far from necessary.

But what about cost? The LSGCD brochure admits that imposing groundwater use restrictions has cost groundwater users “hundreds of millions of dollars thus far” in just preparing to comply with its regulatory muddle. And who pays that cost? The ultimate consumers of water in Montgomery County, many of whom have already noticed the spike in their water bills in the past months.

Take the cost analysis a step further. Remember that groundwater in Texas is owned by the landowner, not the state and not LSGCD. That means the 180 million acre feet belong to private individuals and concerns. What is that water worth? The real cost of lake water from SJRA is about \$2,574 per acre foot. According to TWDB analysis, 25-75 percent of that water is recoverable. If you assume that groundwater is of equal value to lake water, and you assume that only 25 percent of the groundwater is recoverable, then the value of that water is \$115.8 billion. With a big capital “B.”

Intera, the critic of TWDB, says only 2 percent of the 180 million acre feet can be recovered, and that pumping water from the aquifers of Montgomery County will cause the whole county to sink into the earth. Putting aside the overreaching sweep of that claim, it’s undisputed that subsidence will never be caused by pumping the Jasper aquifer, so let’s confine our economic analysis to that one aquifer. TWDB estimates that there are 126,144,064 acre feet in storage in the Jasper. If we use Intera’s estimated recoverable percentage (2 percent) for the Jasper only, the value of the recoverable water is \$6,493,896,415.

So, making the “least case” assumptions, LSGCD has basically said that \$6.5 billion worth of groundwater cannot ever be used for anything and is therefore rendered valueless by the regulatory action of a governmental entity. That spells “taking claim” for every groundwater owner in the county. Dividing \$6.5 billion by the population of the county means that every man, woman and child in the county would have to pay \$13,000 to pay off the judgment. And that’s if the judgment is for 2 percent of the water instead of 25 percent.

Worth the cost? It's time for the Montgomery County residents to stand up and say "no way" to LSGCD and SJRA.

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