

Jacksonville Daily Progress

Published: June 03, 2006

The Fate of the Neches

Proposals plan Fastrill Reservoir, Wildlife Refuge for same area

Since it was proposed, the Fastrill Reservoir has had Cherokee County residents talking. The reservoir would greatly affect the people and animals of the area, with possible economic benefits to locals of Anderson and Cherokee Counties. The many possibilities for the area that was once the sawmill town of Fastrill has led to a multitude of voices and opinions eager to join the debate and sway the minds of the people to their cause.

The problem facing the Upper Neches River area is that two mutually exclusive plans have been developed for the same strip of land. Dallas, seeking new water sources for the shortage they know to be coming, wants to flood the area and pipe 80 percent of the resulting water rights back to Dallas County. The Friends of the Neches River, along with a growing number of Cherokee County residents, wants to establish a wildlife refuge on the same land to help preserve some of the plants and animals that make East Texas and the Piney Woods area so special.

Save the river. Save the railroad. Save our land rights. Locals involved have different priorities, perspectives, and agendas that make them view the topic in differing ways, but many seem to want to stop the reservoir. No matter how one looks at it, the ultimate decision will greatly affect the peoples of Palestine, Rusk, and Dallas; as well as determine the fate of countless plants and animals along the Neches River.

Dr. Michael Banks of Jacksonville and the Friends of the Neches River are leading the fight to establish the Neches River Wildlife Refuge. The Friends of the Neches River has more than 1,200 members in Cherokee and Anderson Counties, and has garnered more than 6,000 signatures in support of the refuge, which they have delivered to the offices of several local politicians. Banks has launched a massive letter-writing campaign urging local citizens to write U.S. Representative Jeb Hensarling and Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in support of the refuge.

“The refuge would use 25,000 acres to protect wildlife and provide recreation for the people of East Texas,” Banks said. “The reservoir would take more than 150,000 acres from the tax rolls, causing you to pay more taxes.” While the refuge would also remove acres from the tax rolls and increase taxes, the refuge would require six times less land than the reservoir and would have a revenue-sharing program for local counties and school districts.

Banks asserts that land owners in the Upper Neches River area have even more at stake.

“Forest and family lands would be condemned by eminent domain, meaning local

landowners would be forced to sell their land to the government,” Banks said, “while land for the refuge would only be purchased from willing sellers at appraised fair market value.”

Local Representative Chuck Hopson (D-Jacksonville) has strongly supported the wildlife refuge and what he calls “the legacy” of East Texas.

“The Neches River National Wildlife Refuge would preserve and protect the beautiful land along the Neches River,” Hopson said. “The alternate proposal for that land, the Fastrill Reservoir, does not protect our land; instead, it uses eminent domain to take away land rights and water rights from East Texans.”

Staying Neutral

But not all local politicians have expressed support of the refuge. State Senator Todd Staples (R-Palestine) and U.S. Representative Jeb Hensarling (R-TX 5th) have taken steps to halt the creation of the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge, though both are quick to explain that they merely want all avenues explored before any lasting decision is made.

“I requested that Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton temporarily postpone the irreversible decision of designating the area as a National Wildlife Refuge pending the completion of a feasibility study of the Lake Fastrill Reservoir,” Hensarling said. “I want to ensure that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service consider all options and all opinions before any irreversible action is taken.”

Hensarling has taken a neutral stance, insisting that he believes the final decision, “whether to build a refuge, build a reservoir, both, or neither, ought to be made by the people of Anderson and Cherokee Counties.”

As a conservative, Hensarling said he is concerned with private ownership, and despite his neutrality on the topic, the congressman did concede that a reservoir would result in the loss of land by private owners.

The city of Dallas says it needs the water. If not from here, they will need to find it elsewhere. Factoring in Dallas’ assumed future population and water usage levels, it is estimated that Lake Fastrill, or any other reservoir Dallas builds, would be needed by 2060. Water plans are done fifty years in advance to ensure that there’s plenty of time to flood a valley or two, if need be.

The Upper Neches River Municipal Water Authority (UNRMWA) is one of the strongest proponents of the Fastrill Reservoir. It was the UNRMWA that initially took interest in the Fastrill region in the February 1961 Master Plan for Water Supply Reservoirs. In 2001, Fastrill Reservoir was identified in the East Texas (Region I) Regional Water Plan as containing features which make it desirable for reservoir construction. It is the UNRMWA that would do the grunt work for the dam, should a dam be built.

Supporters of the Fastrill Project cite its inclusion in Texas regional water plans as proof of “state, regional, and local support,” and, according to the UNRMWA, the project has received letters of support from local politicians, local economic development councils and local chambers of commerce. But inclusion in the water plan seems premature considering no feasibility report had been done at the time of the plan. Unless the UNRMWA knew the results of the feasibility report years before it was begun, inclusion in the water plan shouldn’t be viewed as intent to build, but rather intent to investigate.

In regard to what benefit the Fastrill Reservoir would provide for the people of Cherokee and Anderson Counties, UNRMWA had this to say in a recent statement:

“East Texas will benefit substantially by the development of a major water source at no capital cost to local residents. Such a reservoir will provide a substantial economic boost to the area based on residential development around the reservoir and the recreational aspects that are inherent in a lake.”

The recreational aspects and residential development around the lake could be genuine benefits, as shown by Lake Jacksonville’s appeal.

Another feature of Fastrill that makes it particularly attractive to the UNRMWA is its close proximity to Lake Palestine, which would save Dallas considerable money if the two water sources could share the same pipeline.

Consider Conservation

But is the reservoir really needed? According to the Dallas City Hall Web site, Dallas has not yet begun using Lake Fork and Lake Palestine, two reserve water sources that would be used before Fastrill is tapped. That could give Dallas plenty of time to institute an in-depth water conservation program that could make Fastrill unnecessary.

Water usage levels are determined by gallons per capita per day (gpcd), and Dallas boasts an impressively high gpcd level of 238. In fact, Dallas has the second highest gpcd level in all of Texas, and is expected to lead the category by 2020. Dallas’ own records indicate that 60-65 percent of the City of Dallas’ water consumption during the summer months is used to water residents’ yards. Gpcd levels, according to the Texas Water Development Board, for other major Texas cities are as follows: Austin — 177, Houston — 164, and San Antonio — 142.

According to information from the Friends of the Neches River, if the people of Dallas could bring their water usage down to 184 gpcd, still a higher level than Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, the water saved would exceed the water Lake Fastrill would produce, thus eliminating the need for a reservoir. Conserving that much water is easier said than done, but it is certainly possible. And the costs of an in-depth water conservation program would surely be much less than the price to flood a valley, pipe the water to Dallas, and build roads and bridges over the new lake.

In fact, a 2002 poll conducted by The Tarrance Group, a polling and research firm, showed that Texans would prefer comprehensive conservation programs over expensive dams and pipelines by a 2-to-1 margin (54 percent to 27 percent). According to Texas Water Matters, “the majority of Texas voters are willing to personally participate in specific and meaningful water conservation measures at home such as installing water-saving appliances and limiting lawn watering. With only very limited exceptions, the State Water Plan does not call on Texans to do any of these things — even though they have been shown dramatically to reduce per capita water consumption in places like San Antonio and El Paso.”

According to Janice Bezanson, Executive Director of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, “If Dallas still needs water after reasonable conservation, then there are a number of underutilized reservoirs that Dallas could tap — Lakes Texoma, Wright Patman, and Toledo Bend, to name three.”

The Texas State Railroad

As if the reservoir/refuge debate wasn't convoluted enough already, one can't discuss the proposed reservoir without taking into account its effect on the Texas State Railroad, which runs across the bottom of the proposed Fastrill Reservoir. If the proposed reservoir becomes a reality, the TSRR would either have to stop all runs and exist only as a static museum, or sections of the railway would need to be raised over the reservoir; the cost of which has been widely disputed. The Friends of the Neches River claim such an undertaking would cost \$130 million, while the office of Sen. Staples has determined the bill to be \$16.2 million and had this to say on the topic: “Some astronomical cost figures regarding the construction of a bridge have been circulated in order to cause public doubt and alarm.”

The actual price of building the TSRR over the proposed Fastrill Reservoir is probably somewhere in-between those figures — either way there is no guarantee that the amount needed to raise the rail will be available for that purpose when the time comes.

Banks sees compatibility with the railroad to be a great advantage for the refuge.

Hopson agrees, saying, “The Neches River Refuge is also compatible with the Texas State Railroad. The TSRR is a local treasure that I and the people in my community deeply and sincerely cherish. The Fastrill Reservoir could prove to be a severe hindrance to the operation of the TSRR, and that's a risk I'm not willing to take.”

Hopson filed House Bill 146 a few weeks ago, which would have funded the TSRR through August 31, 2007, but it did not make it out of committee.

Regardless of the situation in Fastrill, the TSRR will undergo changes at the end of 2006. Despite attracting 56,000 riders and bringing more than \$6 million into the local economy last year, the railroad is scheduled to end runs in December. Unless money is allocated

from elsewhere to cover its costs, the TSRR will either close down on Dec. 31, 2006 and become a stationary museum, or will be bought out by another railroad that will keep it operational. Mark Price, operations manager of the TSRR, confirmed that American Heritage Railways, who operates historic railroads like the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad and the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad, has expressed interest in buying out the TSRR.

What's Next?

The next step in the reservoir v. refuge debate lies within the pages of a finished but unreleased feasibility report conducted by the Upper Neches River Municipal Water Authority. The \$228,000 feasibility report should cover issues like the estimated cost of building the Fastrill Reservoir and the environmental changes that the dam would cause.

The exact extent of those environmental changes won't be known until the feasibility report is released, but some forecasting can be done. The Neches River south of the Fastrill Reservoir could suffer. With less water flow and fewer nutrients, the lower Neches River would be able to support less life.

Several state parks, including the Big Thicket National Preserve, depend upon the Neches River's water, and could be negatively effected by a dam up-stream cutting short the water supply.

According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the state of Texas has already lost more than 75 percent of its bottomland hardwood habitat to reservoirs, clearing and conversion to other uses. The proposed reservoir would flood even more of the unique forests, possibly up to 33,000 acres of it.