

# East Texans voice displeasure over Fastrill project

By **GEORGIA PURDY**

East Texans once again made their pleas to stop the building of Fastrill Dam on the Neches River, which is still included in the draft 2007 State Water Plan for Region I.

At the final round of public hearings held by the Texas Water Development Board in Nacogdoches Wednesday, Sept. 27, citizens from Jasper, Lufkin, Orange, Rusk, Jacksonville, Mount Pleasant and numerous smaller communities bordering the Neches River, appeared aggravated that the natural resources and economy of Region I is being sacrificed in order to meet projected water needs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area which lies in Region C.

"I thought we were clear about Fastrill (last year)," Jasper resident John Matthews said. "Where did those recommendations go?"

The contentious part of the Region I plan is the building of Fastrill Dam on the upper Neches River in Cherokee and Anderson Counties. It also leaves the proposed Rockland Dam in Tyler County as an alternative. New dams on the Neches were adamantly rejected by the majority who made oral/written comments in the first round of public hearings in 2005.

What has East Texans so riled is that the impoundment is not for water needs in Region I, but to supply the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Critics point out that Dallas has the highest per capita water use in the state and that two reserve reservoirs, Lake Palestine and Lake Fork have not yet been tapped. Several of the 14 people who spoke at the Nacogdoches meeting, cited the lack of water conservation in the area, including the fact that some 60-65 percent of the city of Dallas' water consumption during the summer months is used to water residents' yards.

"I keep hearing about the need for adequate water resources in Dallas," said Diann Avriett of the Piney Woods Sierra Group. "Does this mean lush lawns and golf courses? The water plan is costly and should be revised to include more conservation."

Texas is divided into 16 regions and there are 16 new reservoirs listed in the 50- year state water plan; East Texas makes up Region I which runs from Jefferson County up to Smith County and takes in Jasper and Newton counties to the east and Houston County on the western edge. The Region I plan has drawn strong criticism from a broad range of citizens-from private landowners to environmental and conservation groups.

Bill Tetley, representing both the state and Golden Triangle Sierra Club said that while this round of planning makes progress in environmental needs, it is not adequate.

Tetley said that the regional groups as well as the state chapter of the Sierra Club do not believe the current water plan is in the best interests of Region I.

"That region (Region C containing the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex) continues to increase their per capita use of water. Take them out of the equation," he said. "They want to take from other areas while, at the same time, do not practice good conservation."

Tetley cited several negative impacts if additional dams are built on the Neches, thus reducing water flow: coastal areas; the Big Thicket, which depends on flooding of the river; and the production of hardwood timber which grows in bottom lands. Irreparable damage to the Big Thicket is of particular concern in Deep East Texas.

Former Temple-Inland employee Richard Donovan of Lufkin, who, together with his daughter Gina has twice paddled the 225 miles of the Neches from Lake Palestine to B.A. Steinhagen

Lake challenged the grass roots "consensus driven process" presented by Texas Water Development Board spokesman Bill Mullican.

"How can Region C have a right to the water from Region I? This board is not a valid representation of the people because it does not have enough public nor environmental representation," Donovan said. "It is not a grassroots effort as presented. There are too many engineering firms and business interests on these boards. I've been to many of these meetings. You are always courteous, you listen to me, but that's it. I am never approached for my opinion. Conservation and desalination are better options (than building dams)."

Several speakers mentioned the destruction of the Texas State Railroad which draws some 80,000 visitors a year to ride the steam engine between Palestine and Rusk. The lake created by the new dam would inundate much of the track, requiring either a bridge across the water or a complete shut down of passenger excursions.

Mary Decker, representing Friends of the Texas State Railroad said that the economies of Cherokee and Anderson counties would suffer.

"Fastrill is a disaster for our area. We are already a poor area and killing the railroad park would do serious damage," Decker said. "This lake would also condemn 150,000 acres of private and company property."

Another sticking point is the destruction of the Neches River Wildlife Refuge that was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in June. The refuge will cover 25,000 acres along 38 miles of the river, protecting native wildlife species that rely on quality, ecologically rich bottomland hardwood forests, wetlands and riparian areas. It lies in the proposed dam area.

Lufkin resident Bonnie Donovan said that over 10,000 people wrote letters to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall, who signed the order this summer.

"Now, I guess that doesn't amount to a hill of beans," she said after the meeting.

East Texans can still make their wishes known. Written comments may be sent by Oct. 6. Citizens may write to Bill Roberts, Texas Water Development Board, P.O. Box 13231, Austin, TX 78711- 3231 or email at [bill.roberts.twdb.state.tx.us](mailto:bill.roberts.twdb.state.tx.us)