

Development in Hill Country is accelerating

Availability of water helps spur new subdivision, new problems.

By [Kate Miller Morton](#)

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The five miles of new water pipe are buried, the backhoes gone. But change is just beginning on Hamilton Pool Road.

Development follows water, and soon trees will be cleared, concrete will be poured, and the wooden frames of houses will multiply on newly paved dead-end streets. Grocery stores and gas stations will follow the new folks moving in, and the twisting country lane will become a major thoroughfare in western Travis County.

Spurred by growing demand for high-end housing, the cul-de-sacs are marching into the Hill Country, conquering and taming the rugged land.

Developers are rushing to build houses faster and in larger numbers than ever before in western Travis and northern Hays counties. The Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization estimates that more than 114,700 people will move into and along the triangle of land between Texas 71 and U.S. 290 west of Oak Hill in the next 25 years. The population of the area has nearly doubled, to about 48,000, since 1997.

"People are going to move west," transportation consultant Mike Weaver said. "They can afford it, and they want to be there."

And political opposition will make it hard for large employers to move into the Hill Country, forcing the new residents to commute on the area's already crowded roads.

Areas north, south and east of Austin will grow faster, but the suburbanization of small towns such as Leander, Manor and Kyle won't stir the same widespread sense of loss as development of the Hill Country.

The land in Austin's backyard is a cherished part of the city's character and lifestyle. It's an oversized playground for outdoor adventurers, a must-see attraction for out-of-town visitors and a marketing tool for the city. It's not just the area's charm and beauty that are threatened by development. The Hill Country's sharp slopes, clear streams and vitally important underground waterways make it particularly environmentally sensitive.

The additional houses, cars and people could pollute and clog those waterways, which supply water to 50,000 people and Barton Springs. More wells will drain the Edwards Aquifer, and the increased use of surface water from the Colorado River will reduce water available for agricultural use downstream.

"There just doesn't seem to be any recognition of the reckoning that's coming," said George Cofer, executive director of the Hill Country Conservancy. "We have people moving to the Hill Country that love the openness of it and the natural beauty, the special places . . . but it's killing the goose that laid the golden egg. The Hill Country has the capacity for so many people, and I think we're approaching that capacity west of Austin pretty quickly."

Developers argue that their dense new subdivisions with modern water and wastewater systems are better for the environment than older subdivisions that relied on septic tanks and well water. The projects also will provide cheaper living opportunities for people who can't afford — or don't want — to buy the large tracts of land that have typified it.

There is little that environmental groups or local governments can do to stem the tide of development. "There is no one entity in charge," said Michael Aulick, executive director of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. "It's a chaotic system in the scientific sense of the word."

Follow the water

Of the many forces pushing the Hill Country development boom, none is more influential than the arrival of water pipes drawing from the Lower Colorado River Authority's lakes.

"You just can't do large-scale subdivisions without having an uninterrupted source of water, and the wells in Hays and western Travis County are prone to go dry during periods of drought," said market researcher Charles Heimsath, president of Capitol Market Research.

To catch a glimpse of the future of Hamilton Pool Road, one need only travel to U.S. 290, where five years ago the LCRA began building a 13-mile waterline from the pump station on Southwest Parkway and Texas 71 to about a mile east of RM 12 in Dripping Springs. Several large projects already under construction or approved along 290 will add about 4,900 homes on 4,516 acres.

Large projects with houses clustered close together would be impossible without the pipes.

Cities and counties have long required lots for houses using wells or septic systems to be large.

Developers can build their own sewage treatment plants, but providing water is nearly impossible without a big water pipe nearby.

Local developer Bill Gunn said he would not have even considered building the 1,700-home Sweetwater development on Texas 71 south of Lakeway if he had not been able to tap into LCRA water.

The project drew sharp opposition from nearby residents and environmentalists, but Gunn argues that developments with lots of houses clustered on portions of big tracts are better for the Hill Country and developers: They bring housing prices down because developers don't have to lay as much pipe. They also make surface water and sewage treatment plants affordable, supplanting wells and septic tanks that drain the aquifer and pollute the groundwater, he said.

Sweetwater's water and sewer systems will still be twice as expensive to build as Gunn's developments in Williamson County, he said, and the land was twice as expensive as well, pushing home prices in Sweetwater above \$300,000.

"The (profit) of developing something in the Hill Country makes it very attractive to develop," Gunn said. "The demands of the home-buying public are so keen, and shortages created by regulations almost guarantee that a developer will be successful."

New suburban-style subdivisions aren't just changing the aesthetics of western Travis County and northern Hays County. They are changing the culture as well.

A shift in lifestyle

Gene Lowenthal, a former tech executive, and his wife, Linda, a hospice nurse, built their hillside home on 58 acres near Hamilton Pool Road in 1994, the latest in a series of westward moves intended to get them away from the rooftops and noise of the city and its suburbs.

"Land fascinates Linda and me, maybe the way oriental carpets or Italian art fascinates other people," he said.

"Each piece is unique and special."

The Lowenthals try to maintain their land as the ranchers before them did. They clear brush and cedar and leave the wild grasses to grow.

The Lowenthals don't see their neighbors much and don't consider themselves to be part of a community outside the boundaries of their own land.

But development is closing in.

Separated from the Lowenthals' property by nothing more than a barbed wire fence, the 468-acre, 468-lot Rocky Creek Ranch is slated to be one of the first large subdivisions built on Hamilton Pool Road.

Developer James Kerby is awaiting state approval for a wastewater permit.

The Lowenthals are contesting the application because they fear that plans to spray the subdivision's effluent over 200 acres of undeveloped land would damage Rocky Creek, which feeds into Barton Creek.

They also fear that their way of life will be quickly overrun by suburbanites who value convenience and comfort more than beauty and tradition.

"I see a ton of city folks who would rather bring the city with them than assimilate to a foreign culture," he said.

Among the new suburbanites are Arizona transplants Jacque and Mitch Barclay, for whom Hill Country beauty is found on a smoothly paved, quiet cul-de-sac ringed with large houses and well-tended lawns and chock-full of playmates for their 5-year-old daughter, Julia.

"I love how the development is set up so it's conducive to form great relationships with neighbors," Jacque Barclay said of her Highpointe of Dripping Springs community. "All the streets are cul-de-sacs, so it's very easy to become very close to your neighbors."

There are lighted tennis courts, a community swimming pool and a two-story community center that has regular mah-jongg games.

Besides trips to their daughter's Dripping Springs school and their church on Bee Cave Road and business trips for Mitch, the Barclays rarely venture outside of Highpointe.

"I was used to putting my daughter to bed and I'd run to Starbucks," Jacque Barclay said of her former life in the Phoenix suburbs.

"We have to strategically plan our Starbucks run. We bring insulated freezer bags when we go to the grocery store, but for us that's a small price to pay for how beautiful it is and how much we love it out there."

Architect Curtis Raymond and his wife, Kellie, live a similarly secluded life with their three young children behind the gates of the nearby Belterra subdivision.

Now on their second home on the same cul-de-sac, the Raymonds said they wouldn't have moved into anything other than a modern subdivision like Belterra.

Curtis Raymond said he is vaguely aware of anxiety and hostility from some area residents.

"Honestly, I understand where they are coming from," he said. "However, (development) is going to occur no matter how hard someone tries to stop it. If they feel like the area is becoming something they don't want it to be, I feel like there are a lot of other undeveloped spaces to move into."

But jobs can't follow

Although residential development in northern Hays and western Travis counties is flourishing, commercial development lags far behind it.

The furor over Advanced Micro Devices' plans to build a new corporate headquarters near Southwest Parkway underscores how difficult, if not impossible, it will be for major employers to push west.

Construction of the Hill Country Galleria, a large mall with well-known tenants such as Dillard's, Barnes & Noble and Ann Taylor Loft, is well under way but also faced stiff opposition that is likely to limit future retail development.

That's welcome news for environmentalists who fear contaminated runoff.

But with jobs far away in Austin, Round Rock or elsewhere, at least one member of most new households will have to hit the roads to get to work.

The Texas Department of Transportation predicts that daily traffic will nearly double on many segments of U.S. 290 and Texas 71 within 20 years.

The Transportation Department would like to expand both roadways west of the Y, but it sees little opportunity and money to do more than add center turn lanes for safety unless the highways are converted to toll roads.

Political opposition also makes it difficult for the county to build roads in western Travis County to replace narrow, twisting county roads that have no shoulders or streetlights.

Regulation is tough

Outside incorporated cities, private property rights reign supreme.

Frequently beseeched by passionate environmentalists and irate residents to stem the tide, local officials have few powers to do so and no master plan to guide them.

Municipalities have some limited powers to control development, and counties can do even less.

Last year Dripping Springs enacted a voluntary conservation ordinance to encourage developers to preserve the area's small-town feel and preserve natural attributes such as hillsides, woodlands and watersheds.

Travis County recently enacted new water quality rules that, among other things, require larger setbacks for development near watersheds.

But cities and counties frequently face stiff opposition.

Frost Bank Regional Chairman Bob Huthnance was one of several local landowners who backed a failed bid in the Legislature last year to require governments to compensate landowners for value lost from new regulations.

Huthnance and his wife have no plans to sell their 1,500-acre Peacock Ranch on Hamilton Pool Road but worry that Travis County's new water quality ordinances will greatly reduce the value of their land.

Frequently dry tributaries of Lick Creek meander through the property, and the 200-foot setback requirements would remove many acres from development.

"I'm all for preserving ranch life, but you shouldn't arbitrarily take someone's land," Huthnance said.

Efforts are being made by cities, counties, private individuals and nonprofit organizations to buy and preserve land as open space, but that is becoming more difficult as land prices escalate.

"When I first started selling real estate 12 years ago, you could buy property on Hamilton Pool Road for \$1,500 an acre," said Carlotta McLean, a Dripping Springs native and broker associate with Wilson Goldrick Realtors. "Now, you are lucky if you can buy on Hamilton Pool Road (east of RM 12) for \$20,000 an acre."

Fritz Steiner, chairman of the nonprofit regional planning organization Envision Central Texas, said he thinks some progress is being made by Austin and Travis County.

"I think it's up to us. It's up to people today," he said.

"It does have great scenic beauty, and if we take the bull by the horns and address these issues, it can retain its scenic beauty."

Simply hoping that growth won't occur in the area isn't an answer, said Bob Daigh, Austin district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation.

"We can have a Pollyanna attitude and wish things, but the entire history of Austin has been that the 'if we don't build it, they won't come' approach has failed miserably on water issues, wastewater issues and on transportation issues," he said.

kmorton@statesman.com; 445-3641

Several large residential developments are planned or under construction along U.S. 290:

1. Belterra 2,000 houses 1,600 acres
2. Headwaters of Barton Creek 1,000 houses 1,500 acres
3. Highpointe of Dripping Springs 1,000 houses 740 acres
4. Scenic Greens 900 houses 676 acres
5. Sweetwater 1,700 homes 1,795 acres

6. West Cypress Hills 1,500 homes 1,100 acres

25,586

Population in 1997 of area between Texas 71 and U.S. 290 from Y at Oak Hill to Blanco County line

48,039

Current population

162,766

2030 projected population

Source: Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization