

To protect aquifer, limit SAWS service area

Annalisa Peace, For the Express-News : July 18, 2014 : Updated: July 18, 2014

SAN ANTONIO — Now that SAWS is considering acquisition of new water supplies from the Vista Ridge project, the prospect that these supplies will be used to expand development over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone looms large.

Since January, the consent agendas at SAWS board meetings have featured 26 requests for water and sewer utility service agreements on the Edwards watershed. Most were approved with no discussion.

By approving these utility service agreements, SAWS opens new areas of highly sensitive aquifer lands to high-density development.

Gene Dawson, president of Pape-Dawson Engineers Inc., sums up the issue quite succinctly in an April 9 article in the San Antonio Express-News, “Business in, waste out,” stating, “Organized wastewater collection is what drives development.”

When SAWS provides water and sewer service, it enables much higher density, usually as high as four to six lots per acre. Housing developments of this density bring increased traffic, thoroughfare construction, sewage infrastructure installed within streams that recharge the aquifer and other related impacts, all leading to pollution of the aquifer.

For this reason, the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, or GEAA, has consistently opposed SAWS wastewater service contracts over the Edwards Aquifer recharge and transitions zones, and the contiguous contributing zone.

At the April 21 meeting of the SAWS board's Policy and Planning Committee, SAWS staff made a presentation regarding SAWS' role in land development.

The question: “Should SAWS oversize infrastructure to tracts over the Edwards Aquifer recharge or contributing zones?”

SAWS staff listed several reasons why they should expand infrastructure to new developments. The sole reason provided by staff against doing so was that “some developments are over recharge or contributing zones.”

To make a decision on this very important issue, we think the SAWS board should be aware of the following facts:

There are a host of expensive regulatory requirements involved with expanding development over the recharge zone, including regular camera testing of sewage lines and inspection of stormwater filtration basins.

None of these measures is required for development that is not over the recharge zone, and these expenses are currently borne by all SAWS ratepayers.

So it appears that SAWS ratepayers are subsidizing development in our most environmentally sensitive area.

In 2007, GEAA and San Geronimo Valley Alliance successfully contested SAWS' permit applications to the state for designation as the sole provider of water and sewer service for large areas of the recharge zone.

Unfortunately, we did not have funds to protect the entire recharge zone in San Antonio's extraterritorial jurisdiction from SAWS' misguided permit applications.

Consequently, SAWS was later required to issue water and wastewater service contracts to Crescent Hills, the controversial high-density development next to the Bracken Cave and preserve.

Acquisition of SAWS service had the effect of driving up the purchase price of this land — making it more expensive for San Antonio to protect this unique part of the recharge zone.

GEAA is calling on SAWS to amend state permits to exclude the entire recharge zone from the area where it is required by law to provide service.

Monitoring conducted by the Edwards Aquifer Authority routinely detects anthropogenic contaminants such as unmetabolized drugs at Comal and Hueco springs. Presence of these pollutants indicates that urbanization of the recharge zone is affecting water quality, as these constituents could only have come from the wastewater stream.

We suspect that the high incidence of SAWS sewage leaks on the recharge zone is contributing to the degradation of our water supplies.

Developments outside of the city of San Antonio's extraterritorial jurisdiction are not subject to San Antonio's water quality ordinances. Nor do they benefit the residents of San Antonio by contributing sales or property taxes. SAWS should not be serving these areas.

These are just a few of the reasons we have for urging the members of the SAWS board to set policy that is consistent with protecting the Edwards Aquifer.

We thank the one board member who has met with us so we could raise some of our concerns during the deliberations that followed the staff presentation.

It is our hope that all the SAWS board members take the opportunity to meet with us prior to adopting a policy regarding service on the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. And we urge all concerned citizens of San Antonio to contact SAWS board members to let them know you favor enhancing protection of the Edwards Aquifer by curtailing SAWS utility service agreements within this region.

SAWS does an excellent job for the residents of San Antonio in so many aspects of its operations. In our opinion, protecting the Edwards Aquifer is not one of them.

Since SAWS is the agency empowered by the city to enforce San Antonio's water quality ordinances, we hope the board will move forward with a well-informed discussion of these issues in the near future.

We need SAWS to become part of the solution in protecting the Edwards Aquifer, not part of the problem.