

Caldwell County residents gear up for wastewater fight amid development



BUY PHOTO

HIDE CAPTION

Caldwell County residents are worried that areas along Dickerson Creek and the San Marcos River, seen here Monday, would be affected if a wastewater dumping permit is approved for a new plant near Lockhart. [LOLA GOMEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

By Chase Karacostas

Posted Jul 15, 2019 at 4:25 PM Updated Jul 15, 2019 at 6:25 PM

Residents in rural Central Texas and environmental advocates are fighting to protect their water supplies from being exposed to treated wastewater, and a meeting for the next battle — against a permit to allow dumping into a creek that feeds private wells and the San Marcos River — is set for Tuesday night.

A new development off Texas 80 near Texas 130, just south of Lockhart, called Cherryville has requested a permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to build a wastewater treatment plant that will dump directly into Dickerson Creek, a waterway that after several miles feeds into the San Marcos River.

A public hearing is scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday inside Prairie Lea High School's auditorium to gather input on the permit, which would allow a pending treatment plant to dump up to 160,000 gallons of treated wastewater per day into the creek.

The creek supports private wells in the area that, in some cases, are the only source of water for nearby residents, one of the main reasons environmental groups have taken up arms against the permit.

"Those people, they don't have treatment plants. They're using the drinking water out of their wells," said Dianne Wassenich, executive director of the San Marcos River Foundation. "That's a water quality health issue that I really think our state does not yet have a grip on."

Wassenich said the treated wastewater could affect sources used by nearby public water suppliers, such as the Tri-Community Water Supply Corp.

"We're really concerned about the effects on those public supply wells, which could impact hundreds of people in that area," said Annalisa Peace, executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, another water advocacy group. "We're also concerned that that area is used recreationally and (this could) diminish water quality for recreation."

The chief operations officer of Cherryville, Jason Cherry, had not responded Monday to the American-Statesman's phone calls and emails requesting comment.

Peace said the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance is actively fighting seven other permits, including one that's been approved, to put treated wastewater directly into Central Texas waterways.

The requested permits would affect the Blanco River, Commissioners Creek, Honey Creek, Indian Creek, Barton Creek and Cibolo Creek. An approved permit, against which the water watchdog Save Our Springs Alliance filed a lawsuit, lets the city of Dripping Springs adapt its existing treatment plant to allow dumping into Onion Creek, which feeds Barton Springs. However, Dripping Springs officials said direct discharge into the creek will only serve as a backup and they plan to maximize water reuse.

The problem, advocates say, is not the wastewater treatment plants — having them is more environmentally friendly than dumping raw sewage in a landfill — but they prefer that the treated wastewater, typically high in nutrients that can lead to harmful algae blooms, be instead used for land irrigation, as is currently done in Dripping Springs. Although the process is more expensive than direct waterway discharge, the land absorbs the excess nutrients and filters out any remaining waste particles, reducing contamination to groundwater.

"It's really frustrating because development in the Hill Country region is just going crazy — there's so much new development," Peace said.

Civil and environmental engineering expert Desmond Lowler said treated wastewater is a long way from being drinkable and could easily contaminate groundwater to a level that makes it hazardous for direct consumption from a private well or nearby public drinking water intake.

Peace said she hasn't seen this many direct discharge requests in years and attributed it to the rapid growth Central Texas has seen in the past decade. Now, unincorporated

areas that have little oversight are seeing rapid development, leading to “what seems like a new request every month.”

“The proliferation of them — it’s just kind of staggering at this point,” she said.

Peace said that in the past, the developments would usually seek land application permits first and then get direct discharge permits when they would expand and want to build out on that land.

“Now what we’re saying is they’re just applying for the discharge permits from the get-go,” she said.

Permits are not the only source of frustration surrounding wastewater in Central Texas. The South Fork treatment plant in Liberty Hill has had illegal spills several times in the past seven months. The spills introduced wastewater full of solids from the sewage that had not been fully treated, causing an algae bloom in that section of the South San Gabriel River and potentially making activities such as swimming dangerous.

“If the treatment has not been sufficient, then one of the concerns would be that the dissolved oxygen level in the water and receiving stream would go below a certain value and end up killing fish,” Lowler said.

