

It's time to give counties power

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Texas has many things to love. Scenic beauty is widespread, varied and often spectacular. Our cultural heritage is rich, drawing on many ethnic groups and races, and, more than any other state, Texas projects an image that is hard to fully define, but no less real. We love these things about Texas so much that we are in danger of loving it to death.

Population growth is the most obvious factor in this love and death situation. In the decade between 2010 and 2020, we grew more than any other state, and at twice the rate of the nation.

Officially, the 2020 census said that we added four million people. A review after publication led the census folks to say they probably undercounted the state about 800,000 people. So, the growth was closer to five million.

Where the growth happened is another contributing factor. In the last decade more than half of state's 254 counties lost population.

The growth happened primarily in the counties surrounding our major metro areas. Areas like the I-35 corridor, between Austin and San Antonio. Some of the growth has happened within the borders of cities and villages. Much of it has happened in the rural countryside.

More people mean a greater demand for land for housing, business, or recreation. Greater demand drives up land values. Higher land values increase the incentive and pressure to subdivide ranches and farms. Ultimately, agricultural lands are converted to other uses and the rural nature of the landscape is lost.

Growth is going to continue. Our population is projected to exceed 50 million by 2050.

That's another 20 million people.

The issue we should be thinking about is how we can deal with growth to protect the things that we love about the state.

We can do as we have always done and simply watch it happen, with no land use planning or control outside of our cities. Or we can try to guide it to make it less harmful to the things that drew us here and the things we will need to survive.

If we choose the second path, we must confront another of the things that many love about the state. That is the image we have of ourselves. One writer said that a Texan's image of Texas is a lone man on horseback. It's an image drawn from our history: rural, rugged, independent, self-sufficient.

At a time when less than 10% of our population live in rural areas and less than 1% are landowners, it's an image that doesn't match reality. But it is an image that continues to guide many of our laws, particularly laws related to the use of land.

Aside from approving new subdivision plates, counties have virtually no role in land use decisions in rural areas. Within some very broad guidelines and a few state permitting requirements, a rural landowner can do just about anything with his land.

A warehouse for fireworks or a stone quarry can be developed next to homes. A subdivision, a business, or a parking lot can be built over the recharge zone of the aquifer.

A development can cause the need for public investments in roads or other infrastructure at no cost of the developer. The list of allowable things is much longer, but these seem to call out for action most immediately.

County land use planning authority has been a topic of discussion with state lawmakers for decades. It will be again in the next legislative session. It's time that we recognize that our state has changed and is changing. That change requires new rules and new responses. Allow counties to have the authority to protect the things that we love about

Texas.

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