

Hot topic ! WATER SUPPLIES

FM begs district not to build reservoir

Mayor says lake expensive, not necessary; agency says it's needed to avoid crisis

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By WENDY HUNDLEY
Staff Writer
whundley@dallasnews.com

Flower Mound's decade-old dispute with the Upper Trinity Regional Water District over its plans to build Lake Ralph Hall is scheduled to go to another level this week.

But first, the town's mayor, Tom Hayden, made a final appeal to the water district.

"We can conclude this today, but you'll have to meet me at least 49 percent of the way," Hayden urged board members Thursday at the water district's January meeting.

It was the second time Hayden has asked the board to reconsider its plan to build the reservoir he feels is not needed and could cause water costs to skyrocket.

The plea came on the eve of a hearing scheduled to start Tuesday in Austin that could influence whether the lake will be built on a 12,000-acre site in southeastern Fannin County.

The State Office of Administrative Hearings will hear testimony on the Upper Trinity's 2003 application for a water use permit before giving a recommendation to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

The environmental agency's final decision on the lake is expected to come later this year.

The contested case hearing, which could last two weeks, will

give Flower Mound and two environmental groups a last chance to make their case for scrapping the lake project.

It will also give Upper Trinity an opportunity to convince state officials that Lake Ralph Hall, named after the longtime Texas congressman from Rockwall, is vital to meeting future water needs for North Texas.

District officials say it would supply about 30 million gallons of water each day to 25 communities in Denton County and surrounding areas.

"Lake Ralph Hall is a critical project, necessary for the Upper Trinity Regional Water District and the North Texas region to avoid a future water supply crisis," Jason Pierce, the district's manager of watershed and contract services, said in an email. "The state of Texas has confirmed in the Texas Water Plan the need for Lake Ralph Hall."

Officials believe the project has widespread support and express confidence that it will be approved.

Environmentalists have questioned the need for another reservoir and have raised concerns about the effect the lake would have on agriculture and wildlife.

They've also questioned whether Upper Trinity is doing enough to conserve water.

"We don't think they're meeting that task," said Myron Hess, an attorney for the National Wildlife Federation, one of two environmental groups opposing the Lake Ralph Hall permit.

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FLOWER MOUND/NORTH TEXAS

FM begs water district to reconsider reservoir

For Flower Mound, the matter comes down to dollars and cents.

Both are adding up for the Denton County town that has a seat on the Upper Trinity's board but not enough votes to turn the tide against the lake plan.

Mayor Hayden feels the town is paying too much for Upper Trinity water.

"Several years ago, Flower Mound goofed up and subscribed to more water than we need," he said. "Our [growth] projections were wrong. It's hurt us."

The town buys water on a wholesale basis from two sources: Upper Trinity and Dallas Water Utilities.

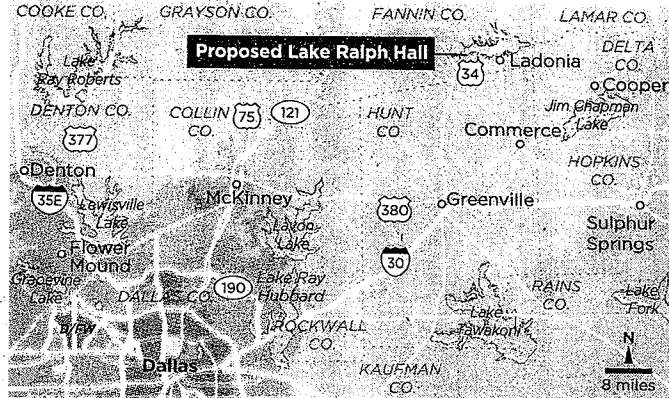
It pays 35 cents per 1,000 gallons from Dallas and 86 cents for the same amount from Upper Trinity.

Upper Trinity officials point out that the Dallas water system is older and has already paid off most of its debt.

If Lake Ralph Hall is approved, Flower Mound officials fear water bills will soar to pay for the debt for the project they say could cost \$450 million. Upper Trinity officials put the price tag at \$250 million.

On Thursday, Hayden proposed a compromise to the district: Flower Mound would drop its opposition to Lake Ralph Hall if Upper Trinity would work with Dallas Water Utilities to find more economical water sources and put the lake project on hold until it can show there's a customer base.

"I don't want them building a lake when their demand is only 50 percent of their current supply," Hayden said.



File Graphic

Dallas recently began bringing in water from Lake Fork and has begun work to bring Lake Palestine water into the system in 2015.

With the additional water supplies, Hayden believes that Dallas Water Utilities will be able to provide more economical water to customers for many years to come.

Hayden said he never received any response to his proposal. On Friday, Pierce issued a written statement.

"Upper Trinity has considered all feasible options for additional water supplies, including the acquisition of additional water from the city of Dallas," Pierce said in an email. "Lake Ralph Hall is the right size for the needs of Upper Trinity and can be completed in time to avoid a future water crisis."