

CITY OF BASTROP

Beal defends Austin water talks

Councilman told city Bastrop aquifer could help supply water.

By Debbie Moore Special to the Advertiser

More than a few eyebrows were raised when word got back to Bastrop that City Councilman Joe Beal had offered testimony before a special meeting of the Austin City Council during which he recommended that the city of Austin look to the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer in Lee and Bastrop counties as an additional source of water.

Beal was invited to the Feb. 9 meeting by Austin Mayor Steve Adler to address the first of many “deep-dive” meetings on various matters such as water, transportation, health and energy.

While Beal acknowledged that his presence at an Austin City Council meeting may have ruffled some local feathers, he said that his advice could only help Bastrop.

Beal feels that a lot of the success Bastrop is currently enjoying is “because of the economic engine of Austin. If Austin finds itself with an inadequate water supply, that economic engine will slow down, and it will be felt in Bastrop.”

“My private interest in creating a new water supply for the region has nothing to do with my service on the council,” he said. “The city of Bastrop has acquired long-term water supplies, which don’t relate in any way to comments I made to the Austin City Council.”

There are political realities to consider, Beal said.

“I said the same thing 15 or more years ago when LCRA was looking at supplying San Antonio with water,” he said. “There are a lot more legislators representing Austin than there are here. If Austin decides underground water is going to be a supply, they will figure out a way to get it.

“I have worked hard to make things better in the Bastrop area during the 20 years I have lived here. It is disappointing to see the visceral reaction to the fact that I appeared before another city’s council and gave my opinion.”

Bastrop Mayor Ken Kesselus said that he appreciates Beal’s contributions to a regional solution for the simmering Central Texas water crisis, but the city’s only interest is doing what’s best for Bastrop.

“I want to make it clear that the city of Bastrop is concerned about water,” Kesselus said. “In order to obtain a long-term supply from local sources, we have purchased water. We are working diligently to gain permits to dig those wells and put them into production so we can provide water for the future of Bastrop. That is our only interest in water in Bastrop County.”

With regard to Beal’s comments, Kesselus said, “Any City Council member is free to talk about their level of expertise. Joe is a leading water expert in the state.”

Other members of the Bastrop City Council and at least one county official said they had no previous knowledge of Beal’s remarks.

Beal said that during the almost two-hour meeting with Austin officials, he was one of four people asked to participate in the part of the session that encouraged “thought-provoking comments” regarding water.

Beal introduced himself as a civil engineer, a former manager of the Lower Colorado River Authority, and a member of the Bastrop City Council.

“I was not there as a Bastrop City Council member,” he said. “My comments were along lines of ‘Austin, you have problem, and you need to figure out what you going to do to fix it and do it quickly.’”

Because of the continued drought, which rivals the record-setting drought of the 1950s, Austin can no longer rely on a single source of water, Beal said.

“Austin must concentrate on conservation, reuse and another supply,” he said. “In my opinion, there is a tremendous amount of water 35 miles away in the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer. Austin should look and see if that is a supply they could use.”

One of the options Austin is considering is the use of effluent from its wastewater treatment plant as a possible drinking water source. Effluent is water that is treated and then discharged from a wastewater plant.

“Currently, the majority of the return flow in the Colorado River through Bastrop is from effluent,” Beal said. “If Austin begins using the effluent for drinking water, it will reduce the amount of water released into the river, and it will have a significant impact on our flow.”

There is a difference in the ownership of surface or groundwater versus underground water, Beal explained.

“The Colorado River water belongs to the people of Dallas as much as it does to us,” he said. “Underground water is different. It belongs to whoever owns the surface rights. It is an individual’s property right.”

Beal’s comments even spilled over into the House District 17 special election, which was won by Republican John Cyrier on Feb. 17. In the District 17 runoff, Beal was among a large number of city and county elected officials who endorsed Cyrier’s candidacy. Brent Golemon, Cyrier’s Republican foe, received the endorsement from Linda Curtis, the candidate who finished third in the race. Curtis is a longtime community activist who is vocal on Central Texas water issues.



Bastrop city councilman Joe Beal (right), seen here in 2014 with former Bastrop mayor Terry Orr, says he met with Austin City Council members solely as a private citizen well-versed in water issues.

TERRY HAGERTY / ACN NEWSPAPERS 2014