

METRO

Water board OKs plan to build four reservoirs

Sierra Club, landowners oppose proposal to meet N. Texas' needs in 2060

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Over the objections of environmentalists and East Texans whose land would be affected, North Texas water planners approved a plan Monday that includes construction of four more reservoirs by 2060.

The 16-3 vote capped a five-year effort, much of which occurred in the last year as the growing area's water suppliers, cities and counties finalized the ways they intend to obtain, distribute and use a resource that becomes a little scarcer each day.

"It is a method by which the water needs of the region can be met in the future," Bob Johnson, a member of the group and an assistant director of Dallas Water Utilities, said in urging passage of the plan.

The North Texas panel, known as the Region C Water Planning Group, is one of 16 such bodies around the state. Representatives from water suppliers, cities, counties, industries, agriculture, environmental groups and the general public are members.

The Texas Water Development Board will spend next year reviewing and reconciling the various regions' plans and then will present the Legislature with a statewide plan in early 2007. In the meantime, the process of the next five-year update will begin.

Supporters of the North Texas plan, including developers, the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce and regional water utilities, say the projected doubling of the region's population to 13 million by 2060 will require the new lakes for growth and jobs to be sustained. They note that the regional plan calls for 28 percent of

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the water needed to come from conservation and reuse, significantly more than in the first version of the blueprint done five years ago.

"In supporting the plan, we urge you to keep all options on the table," Jan Hart Black, the Dallas chamber's president, told the group.

Opponents such as the Sierra Club and the Texas Committee on Natural Resources have repeatedly opposed new reservoirs and maintain that existing lakes can provide all the water North Texas needs for the next 55 years. They say the largest of the proposed reservoirs, Marvin Nichols, would flood 100 square miles and require hundreds more to be set aside, destroying farms, ranches, timber, wildlife habitat and jobs in East Texas.

After making those arguments time and again before the Dallas City Council and Region C — and losing in both places — Beth Johnson, an advocate for the Sierra Club and the natural resources committee, said she would continue at the state level.

"Citizens groups and landowners that are threatened by the plan will take the battle to the Water Development Board, to the Legislature and to anyone who will listen," she said, "about what

a needless threat to the people and wildlife habitat this plan is."

Asked whether she was disappointed that only three Region C members opposed the plan, Ms. Johnson said, "Three votes is three more than we got five years ago."

Some board members who supported the plan noted that any new reservoirs would take decades to develop. Even the smallest and quickest, Lake Ralph Hall, proposed by the Lewisville-based Upper Trinity Regional Water District, probably would not be on line for 20 years.

But East Texas resident David Nabors called any proposed reservoir, even one 40 years in the future, a sword of Damocles hanging over residents' heads.

"We can't sell our property," he said. "Nobody will touch it because people say, 'Hey, they're going to build a lake here.'"

Mary Vogelsson, one of two representatives of the general public on the Region C board, opposed the plan, saying it felt like a rubber stamp for big water companies.

"If all we are to do is give a vote to what the major water suppliers want," she said, "then I think we need to go to the Legislature and ask why we are wasting our time here."

But Region C President Jim Parks, who also is executive director of the Wylie-based North Texas Municipal Water District, strongly disagreed that any options should be pulled off the table in the latest version of the plan.

"We're using every technology out there right now that's reasonable to meet the supply need — and I've got the biggest need of anybody in this room," he said, "but when you start chopping the legs out from under us, you hurt everybody."