

Small Texas towns feel strain of metro growth

Texas Water Fund needs mechanism to help communities under stress

By SHANE R. SAUM

On Thursday, the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that from 2022 to 2023, Texas boasted four of the top 10 metro areas with the largest growth in the country. Dallas and Houston were ranked first and second on the list. Austin and San Antonio were seventh and ninth. Among counties with a population of 20,000 or more, Texas has six of the top eight fastest-growing counties nationwide.

While that growth is a great sign of the strength of our state's economy and the attractiveness of our metro areas, it also comes with a strain on our infrastructure. This is acutely felt in smaller communities on the peripheries of these major metro areas, such as Austin. In my town of Lago Vista, about an hour outside of the state's capital, we're witnessing a remarkable surge, propelling our population from 7,000 to over 13,000 in just a few short years, according to a city report, a number much larger than current census data.

That growth has been entirely residential with little to no commercial and industrial, which downtown Austin sees and benefits from through taxes. Unfortunately, this residential boom has stretched our waste and drinking water capacity to its limits, affording us minimal time to plan, fund and construct essential infrastructure.

Lago Vista manages its

own water utility, which pulls water from Lake Travis. Under a current drought response, our residents face a \$15 surcharge drought fee each month on top of their already high water utility payments, compared to neighboring communities.

During the last election, Texans approved the \$1 billion Texas Water Fund, which will be used to transfer money to existing financial assistance programs through the Texas Water Development Board. The board is accepting stakeholder input before promul-

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gating the rules that will decide how these funds are allocated and what the criteria are for municipalities applying.

Along with a letter from the city of Lago Vista, I recently submitted public comments to the Texas Water Development Board urging consideration of additional scoring metrics for communities located near these high-growth metro areas that apply for financial assistance programs. Notably,

current scoring mechanisms include up to 20 additional points for economically disadvantaged communities, a scoring bump that jumps applications to the top of the funding list.

I proposed that equivalent scoring that currently goes to economically disadvantaged communities should also be awarded to communities under undue stress related to neighboring communities' unfettered growth. This adjustment would ensure that smaller municipalities with a population of less than 20,000 residents located near rapidly growing metro areas are equitably supported in their efforts to meet the burgeoning demands for water resources.

The absence of these funding opportunities would significantly hinder the advancement of numerous large-scale infrastructure projects, either subjecting them to prolonged delays, increasing our bond debt or jeopardizing their realization altogether.

I call upon other communities facing similar circumstances to rally behind this initiative, to testify before the Texas Water Development Board, submit letters and advocate for this new metric to be included in the Texas Water Fund rules. Together, we can ensure that the growth of Dallas, Houston, Austin and San Antonio does not bankrupt our towns through endless bond debt and exorbitant water utility fees. Collectively, we can ensure the sustainable development of our state's infrastructure in the face of rapid urban expansion.

Shane R. Saum is a council member for Lago Vista, a city about 50 miles from Austin.