



Lake participants get an update on progress

September 19, 2008 03:14 pm

— By Kelly Young

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Representatives from nearly all of Lake Columbia's participating entities were in Jacksonville on Wednesday for a participants workshop put on by the Angelina and Neches River Authority.

The gathering was an opportunity for the 18 East Texas cities, counties and water-systems councils which have signed on as participants in the proposed water supply reservoir, to receive an update on the project's progress and to get answers to any questions they might have.

About 60 people attended the meeting, which took place from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Norman Activity Center, and a catered lunch from Sadler's was provided. Several officers from Freese and Nichols Inc. engineering firm were on-hand to discuss the process of developing the reservoir once ANRA has received the 404 permit from the United States Army Corps of Engineers that it needs to continue the project.

John Rutledge, vice president of Freese and Nichols Inc., said issuance of the permit will be followed by dam design, dam construction, land acquisition and conflict resolution — most of which can be undertaken simultaneously.

It is anticipated that all aspects of the reservoir's development can be completed within four years of the issuance of the permit, and ANRA believes that could take place by the first part of 2009.

"The land acquisition process is a lot of work. Think about any properties that you may have personally bought, think about all the steps you had to go through, and then multiply that by the number of different properties that will need to be acquired for this lake," Rutledge said. "You can't do these en masse, you have to work with each landowner individually. There is a lot of time and effort that goes into this."

He also said conflict resolution, the process of relocating or protecting existing land features, can be an even more expensive undertaking than dam construction itself.

"The roads and railroads are two of the biggies, but power lines, pipelines, cemeteries and oil wells also all need to be dealt with. Highway 79 is the single biggest ticket item in the conflict resolution of Lake Columbia; it will need to be raised over the lake," Rutledge said.

ANRA General Manager Kenneth Reneau said he doesn't believe there are any cemeteries located within the projected lake area.

According to Rutledge, the participating entities need to be prepared for the public uproar that public-land grabs inevitably cause.

"My next comment to you is to put on your seat belts. You all have been very fortunate; the controversy associated with this reservoir has been the least I have ever seen in a project like this," he said. "But there will be more in the future, particularly when you start getting into the land acquisition. When taking that much land, there will be people who are very upset, and you have to be prepared for that."

Attorney John Stover, ANRA's general counsel, warned those in attendance that Lake Columbia is a water-supply reservoir first and a recreational body second. As such, he said the lake's water level will fluctuate at times as water is needed for consumption.

"The lake's level is going to change. Will I always be able to get my boat in and out of it? The answer is no. Recreational use is going to have to take a subordinating role to the fact that this lake is to supply water to people, their homes and their businesses," Stover said. "The recreational aspect of the lake will be a major contributor for the local economy, but the people who are paying to build it are going to have to be able to get the water they need from it."

The project currently has 63 percent participation, which Reneau said is a sufficient amount for the Texas Water Development Board to come in and carry the project. Lake Columbia is expected to hold 187,839 acre-feet of water, and will provide 85,507 acre-feet of water (27.9 billion gallons) per year to its participating members.

As 5 percent participants in the lake, the city of Jacksonville will gain about 1.4 billion gallons of water a year from the lake, as well as the economic benefits associated with a lake.

A study conducted by ANRA estimates the lake will result in an increase of \$26.2 million annually in spending within a 30-mile radius of the lake by recreational visitors, an increase of \$3.9 million annually by new residents to the area and an annual savings of \$31.2 million due to not needing to import water from another East Texas reservoir.

The same study also indicates Lake Columbia will only result in the annual loss of \$661,000 in timber production and the \$88,000 in annual property tax payments.

Al Chavira, director of ANRA, said the lake will be a great boon to East Texas and will help secure the region's water supply for the future.

"For the rural community, water already is and will continue to be, the number one issue for our survival. We have other ways to bring gas and oil here, but water is something we have to have here. It is a very positive thing that we are building this lake to service the water needs of East Texas," he said. "The lake is also going to cause a great amount of tourism and recreation for our community, and I believe it will also help bring new business here. We have spent a lot of years working on this, and I'm glad to see that it looks like it is going to happen."

Project Participants Percents:

- Afton Grove Water Systems Council 1.0
- City of Alto 0.5
- City of Arp 0.5
- Blackjack Water Systems Council 1.0
- Caro Water Systems Council 0.5
- Cherokee County 3.0
- Jackson Water Systems Council 1.0
- City of Jacksonville 5.0
- City of Nacogdoches 10.0
- City of New London 1.0
- City of New Summerfield 3.0
- North Cherokee Water Systems Council 5.0
- City of Rusk 5.0
- Rusk Rural Water Systems Council 1.0
- Stryker Lake Water Systems Council 0.5
- Temple-inland, Corp. 10.0
- City of Troup 5.0
- City of Whitehouse 10.0

Current Total Participation 63

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