



Citizens Deserve Accurate Information about Water Issue

In a letter to the editor on January 6, 2017, Mike Stoecker shared some of his opinions on Montgomery County's ongoing water issues and closed with a quote attributed (incorrectly) to Thomas Jefferson. I would like to offer up a response to Mr. Stoecker by opening with a fitting quote that actually came from Jefferson: "honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom."

In his letter, Mr. Stoecker uses misinformation and debunked theories in an attempt to persuade the public that Montgomery County does not have a groundwater problem but, instead, that they are the victims of corrupt, big-government regulation. Nothing in his response addresses the real problems that our utilities are experiencing because of water-level declines, and you can't explain them away with misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Let's look at one glaring example. Data from the U.S. Geological Survey shows that water levels in the City of Conroe's wells have declined approximately 400 feet since the 1950s – half of that in the last 13 years. Not only does Mr. Stoecker's letter ignore the water-level declines our aquifers are experiencing, he makes the stunning statement that "the only wells in Montgomery County that actually needed to lower their pumps to continue pumping groundwater were in The Woodlands." This is absolutely, categorically false.

Numerous utilities in Montgomery County have had to lower their pumps due to declining water levels, including the city of Conroe and at least two utilities around Lake Conroe. Based on a quick survey of 12 utilities in the county, 11 have lowered their pumps at least once, and the remaining one has had declines but not yet enough to force them to lower pumps. Furthermore, several of the utilities described more severe actions they have been forced to take such as permanently reducing the capacity of their wells or replacing them entirely.

One of the conspiracy theories advanced by Mr. Stoecker is that "LSGCD was pretty much SJRA's creation in the first place, needed only for the purpose of imposing Draconian restrictions on groundwater pumping in order to create a market for comparatively expensive surface water from Lake Conroe." The Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District was created by the Texas Legislature and approved by the voters in 2001. Mr. Stoecker offers no evidence that SJRA manipulated the Legislature or the voters in 2001 or that they were actively involved in the District's creation. Mr. Stoecker asserts without any support that SJRA successfully implemented a 10-year scheme, beginning before Lone Star was created and culminating in 2010 in the execution of contracts with 80-plus local utilities, to build an unnecessary surface water plant so it could sell a product *at cost*.

To be blunt, SJRA has existed since 1937 and does not operate to turn a profit. SJRA has been selling significant volumes of surface water since the 1940s and didn't need to "create a market" to sell more. And if SJRA was motivated to sell additional surface water, it surely didn't need to concoct the ridiculous scheme suggested by Mr. Stoecker to achieve that result. SJRA has numerous customers downstream of Lake Conroe with rapidly growing demands that could have been more easily served with Lake Conroe water.

Further, SJRA had no reason to offer or undertake a county-wide surface water project other than the need of the county to reduce its groundwater consumption, while still supplying its growing population with sufficient clean water. SJRA could have just as well constructed a surface water plant to serve its customers in The Woodlands and left the rest of the county to fend for itself, in the process creating clear winners and losers depending on which water users had easy and affordable access to surface water, the

Catahoula aquifer, and other alternative sources of supply. But SJRA did not choose to shrink from the challenge of doing what, in its opinion, was in the best interest of the county as a whole.

Mr. Stoecker's letter also repeats the long-debunked myth that SJRA's appointment of a single member to the Lone Star board is somehow a conflict of interest and has allowed SJRA to control the outcome of its regulatory decisions. Mr. Stoecker ignores the principle of majority rule and the fact that Lone Star's regulations were adopted unanimously. Lone Star has a nine member board, including one member appointed by the City of Conroe. No single board member controls the District. And Conroe's representative voted to approve the District's pumpage rules, along with SJRA's representative and every other member of the board.

Contrary to Mr. Stoecker's baseless claims, no one was forced or manipulated into making the decision to manage Montgomery County's aquifers. The representatives on the Lone Star board chose to take a long-term view of water planning that ensures reliable water supplies for future generations. It would certainly have been easier and more politically expedient for them to just adopt his short-sighted view of unlimited pumping in spite of the warning signs and the experience of experts and other utilities in our region. And it is disgraceful to disparage with nothing more than misinformation and conspiracy theories the excellent planning and work that's been accomplished to ensure our future water supplies.