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Hillside Terrace to flush septic woes

Texas Water Board loan program to help link low-income neighborhood to city sewer

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The septic woes of the Hillside Terrace community just east of Buda may finally be on the road to alleviation. After nearly two years of discussion, the sewer line project is now moving forward.

On Thursday, the Clean Water State Revolving Fund Loan Program of the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) approved just over \$400,000 in grant money to begin the planning and design phase of linking the mostly low-income neighborhood to the city of Buda's wastewater/sewer system.

Most of Hillside Terrace is in Buda's extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ), though a small portion is in Austin's five-mile ETJ, according to Buda City Engineer Stanley Fees.

Hillside Terrace residents have experienced problems with septic tanks over the years, ranging from backups

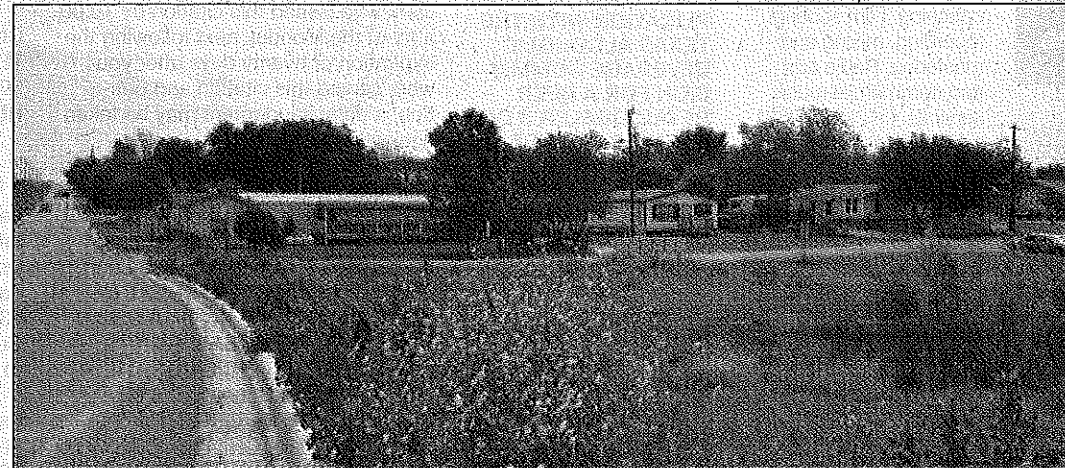


PHOTO BY DAVID WHITE

Homes at Hillside Terrace may have a chance to get rid of their septic systems, as the city of Buda works to put in a new sewer line project. These residents have faced years of faulty systems, ranging from backups into home to spillage into yards and streets.

into homes to spillage into yards and roads, not to mention issues with septic odors.

But the real issue is how those leaks affect Plum Creek, a 52-mile stream that starts in Hays County and flows through Caldwell, meeting the San Marcos River near the Gonzales

County line. Plum Creek has been identified by the state as polluted, which prompted the creation of the Plum Creek Watershed in 2007.

One solution is to connect the neighborhood's 265 homes to Buda's wastewater system, which is already in place at a

nearby development called Stonefield. The challenge with Hillside Terrace is not whether it's a good idea – most of the entities involved and even residents think it is; the problem is the cost.

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A few facts about the Plum Creek Watershed

- Plum Creek and its tributaries drain an area of 397 square miles. The creek is the namesake of the Plum Creek Watershed.
- A watershed is an area of land that water flows across, through or under as it makes its way to a stream, river, lake or ocean.
- The Plum Creek Watershed protects the 52-mile stream that starts in Hays County and flows through Caldwell, meeting the San Marcos River near the Gonzales County line.
- Plum Creek and its tributaries drain an area of 397 square miles.
- Other municipalities all or partially in the watershed include Buda, Niederwald, Uhland, Mustang Ridge and Mountain City.
- Historically, Plum Creek, shallow and intermittent, ran dry during drought but flowed after rain. Before urban development, Plum Creek above Lockhart ran dry most every summer. Due to increased discharge from wastewater treatment plants, Plum Creek now flows year-round over most of its length.
- Three permanent water quality monitoring stations (one each near Uhland, Luling and Lockhart) and several temporary monitoring sites are used to track water quality trends. Water quality data is collected every month at three permanent stations. A Clean Water Act grant supports additional monitoring at the supplemental sites.

Septic to Sewer: Hillside Terrace to flush septic woes

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Converting the entire neighborhood to the wastewater line, which will include decommissioning either most or all of the existing septic tanks, is estimated at about \$5.6 million, according to Fees, Plum Creek Watershed Coordinator Nick Dornak and Hays County Pct. Commissioner Mark Jones.

Buda does not have that kind of funding in its operating budget, nor does Hays County, although Jones said the commissioners support the conversion because "it's the right thing to do for the community."

That's why Dornak said a watershed development partnership is so important. The Plum Creek Watershed Partnership is providing guidance and support to Buda and Hays County.

"We can accomplish so much more as a team than individually," he said.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) designated Plum Creek for aquatic life, con-

tact recreation and fish consumption. With leaking septic tanks throughout the community, Dornak and the watershed staff have been concerned about contamination for several years.

That's why Fees and Dornak turned to the TWDB, which administers loan and grant programs for the planning, acquisition design and construction of water related infrastructure and other water quality improvements.

The board will disperse about \$325 million in total funds this year alone, according to Mark Evans, project lead for the Clean Water State Revolving Funds. The monies include both low-interest loans and loan forgiveness programs, which are similar to grants but are not subject to the same level of federal regulations. However, the TWDB provides what Evans called a stringent review and oversight process.

The TWDB funding will provide \$401,000 to cover the engineering and planning costs of the Hillside Ter-

race project. Dornak said Hillside Terrace qualifies for 70 percent principle forgiveness due to its disadvantaged community status. That amounts to about \$280,000. An interlocal agreement between Buda and Hays County will supply the additional 30 percent or \$120,000 needed to complete the planning and design with Buda paying \$6,000 a year over 10 years on a very low interest rate - potentially around two percent or less, according to Evans. Jones said the county would likely be able to fund its portion of the money up front.

The city has twice gone to the TWDB with its hand out for this project. The first time, the city was not approved but Fees said the board simply decided other projects took precedence over Hillside Terrace. The second time, Buda learned that a portion of the \$400,000 was available but the amount was insufficient to cover the planning so Buda declined the funding offer. Dornak, Fees and Jones

hoped the third time was a charm - they were right.

According to Evans, TWDB uses a point scoring system to make recommendations to fund projects. Plum Creek is identified by TWDB as a polluted stream in the state and Hillside Terrace is a disadvantaged community; those two criteria gave this project more points, which may have helped bump it over the top this time around.

Jones said the county has issued some citations for the leaks because those affect the Plum Creek Watershed. But many residents of the neighborhood can ill afford to pay the citations, let alone the cost of a new septic system, which can run anywhere from \$8,000 to \$15,000, depending on a variety of factors.

Fees said most of the neighbors who attended the public meetings over the past year or so indicated support for the sewer lines.

All of the septic tanks in Hillside Terrace will be decommissioned, ac-

cording to Fees. That is one reason why the project comes with a hefty price tag.

Fees said community meetings with Hillside Terrace residents indicated support for the project. He said even those residents who are considered low-income said they would be willing to pay the connection and monthly wastewater fee to finally be free of the septic nightmares that plague the community.

The cost for the sewer tap and the connection fees for each residence are \$562 and \$2.53, respectively. Homeowners would still need to hire a plumber to connect the wastewater tap unless grant funding can be obtained, according to Fees. The average sewer bill in the city is about \$53.

With the project getting the nod from the TWDB last week, Evans said the next steps include developing the required documents and plans for the project and holding a public hearing on the matter.