

Press Release:

December 29, 2023

The Clearwater Underground Water Conservation District of Bell County General Manager, Dirk Aaron, has announced that the district will be holding 2 public hearings on January 25<sup>th</sup> and on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, to receive input from citizens in both Bell and Williamson Counties on the possible annexation of Western Williamson County into their jurisdiction.

The prescribed two hearings will be held as follows:

- 1) February 12, 2024, at 6:00 P.M. at the Cedar Park Recreation Center, 1435 Main Street, Cedar Park TX.
- 2) February 13, 2024, at 6:00 P.M. at the Harris Community Center, 401 N Alexander St, Belton, TX.

Aaron stated that the district first received a “*Petition for Annexation*” of Western Williamson County at their regular board meeting on December 13, 2023. The district was aware that citizens in western portions of Williamson County would be again pursuing the district to annex all or parts of Williamson County’s western territory.

The citizens first delivered their petition to the Board are known as the [Aquifer Conservation Alliance](#) (ACA) and they organized in late summer and fall of 2022 due to the recent declines in groundwater wells and the increase of groundwater production serving the mining industry of Williamson County.

The Petition was signed by more than 50 Williamson County residents, whom the District has verified as owning land within the western portions of Williamson County. <https://cuwcd.org/3-dates-set-for-public-hearings-related-to-the-annexation-of-western-portions-of-williamson-county/>

Aaron stated for the record, “*The annexation request is for the groundwater conservation district in Bell County to expand our territory by including Western Williamson County, but this has no affiliation with the Bell County Commissioners Court. Misstating this fact can be misleading to the citizens of Williamson County.*”

He further emphasized that “*The most positive turn of events is that Williamson County Commissioners, while opposing the annexation as well as the proposed 2019 legislative study in approved by the Texas House of Representatives by Representative Brad Buckley in the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session, six years ago*” is now being funded by Williamson County.

Aaron further stated: “*His Elected Board of Directors applaud County Commissioner Long for her positive comments in the Community Impact news. She was quoted as saying that Annexation into another groundwater district is premature, but if the results from the study turned out [that] there's some action we need to take, that needs to be directed by Williamson County, in my opinion, and not by another county (Groundwater Conservation District).*”

Aaron reaffirmed that that is the same opinion stressed by most citizens and leaders in Bell County. Having your own locally accountable GCD is far better than a larger entity without local ties. Local discernment and local accountability should rule the day.

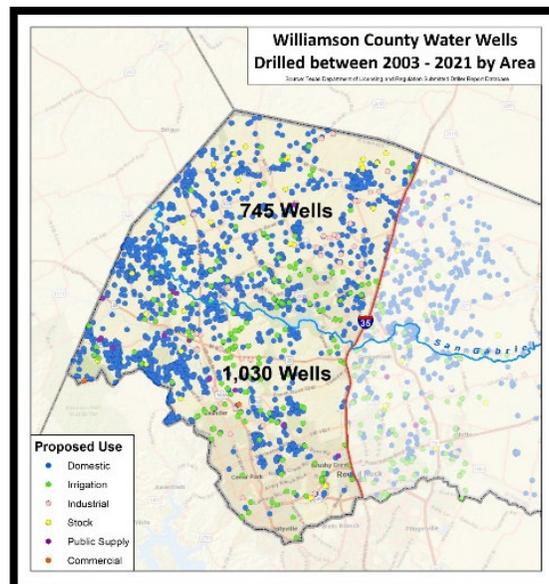
Legal notices are being published in newspapers of Bell and Williamson Counties on January 17, 2024. Aaron stated that the same notices will be posted on January 12, 2024, at both respective county courthouses. This affords the required 20-day notice that a GCD must adhere to when holding public hearings. Aaron verified that the petitioners have met the statutory criteria for an annexation petition prescribed in Texas Groundwater Code “TWC § 36.325”. He urged all that the law also states that the Board (Clearwater) **SHALL** set the time and place of separate hearings on the Petition.

If annexed, then a confirmation election by citizens of Williamson County of the prescribed territory would be in order before citizens are subject to a new property tax. The cost of holding that election would be covered by Clearwater and the estimated cost is \$380,000 or more payable to Williamson County Elections Administration.

The proposed territory simply starts along the north and south boundary of the west right-of-way line of Interstate Highway 35, and extends to the northern Williamson County line, and continues south along the west right-of-way line of Interstate Highway 35 to the southern Williamson County line then to the western Williamson County line boundary with Burnet County. The proposed additional territory for Clearwater would be the western half of Williamson County which is comprised of approximately 503 square miles of land.

Leadership of ACA stated publicly and on their website that *“If have a home in the rural parts of Western Williamson County then you very likely have a ground water well as your sole domestic water supply. If you receive water in your home, it can and often is a blend of surface and groundwater from public water supply entities, MUDs, SUDs or municipalities. Majority of these groundwater wells produce from the Middle Layer of the Trinity Aquifer. The Trinity Aquifer is a major aquifer that extends across much of the central and northeastern part of the state - sixty-one counties contain the aquifer. It is one of the most extensive and highly used groundwater resources in Texas.”*

ACA provided the following figure illustrating the growth in groundwater wells completed in western portions of their County. This documents that more than 1775 new wells have been drilled since 2003-2021, validating the increase of wells across the region. This is contradictory data of what was quoted at the Williamson County



Commissioners Court in Georgetown on January 9, 2024, and reported in the local news yesterday.

The petitioners know that Clearwater is a single county district who can only regulate groundwater in Bell County and that the Central Texas GCD manages groundwater in Burnet County. The organization evaluated their options in petitioning either of these two existing GCDs. Both Districts agree that the groundwater resources of WilCo are being stressed to the point that the current use is no-longer sustainable and the investments of homeowners to the west are experiencing extreme drawdowns in their respective wells and ultimately the loss of the well's capacity to produce or yield water in an efficiently manner.

The ACA's President, Keith Elliston of Liberty Hill, has again stated that the rural and urban centers of WilCo all have investment expectations that groundwater should be sustainable for the long-term, but unfortunately that is not the reality. Mike Keester, consulting hydrogeologist for Clearwater recently updated his project for the district on reviewing the number of wells and production from groundwater in Wilco. The trends speak for themselves that the dependance on groundwater by industry, mining, manufacturing, and retail sectors is harming and accelerating the depletion of the resource in a manner that is harming the domestic users who are dependent on wells.

The public hearings will be conducted in such a manner that all people interested in testifying to the board may do so at either of the hearings. The board has asked the leadership of ACA to layout their petition goals and comments early in both hearings. The board will then take public comments and will ask questions as needed for clarity and discernment of the citizens desire for a district or not.

The Clearwater Underground Water District was established in 1999 by the residents of Bell County to manage and protect the groundwater resources of the county. "*We are a political subdivision of the state of Texas, and we oversee the permitting of wells while providing protection of the groundwater resources across Bell County,*" Clearwater general manager Dirk Aaron said.

Clearwater UWCD is a political subdivision of the State of Texas and was affirmed by Bell County voters to be funded by local property owners by a simple property tax. The district is subject to the current law that prevents taxing entities from increasing property taxes of 3.5% increases. Clearwater consistently has not increased property taxes levels past the No-New-Revenue Rate since 2011.

<b><i>Clearwater UWCD</i></b>	
<b><i>Annual Property Tax Implications</i></b>	
<b><u>FY24 = .002372/ \$100</u></b>	
Parcel @ \$100,000 is	<u>\$ 2.37/year</u>
Parcel @ \$250,000 is	<u>\$ 5.93/year</u>
Parcel @ \$1,000,000 is	<u>\$ 23.70/year</u>

*“We are driven to develop policy based on sound science thus we conduct a lot of research about the state of groundwater in Bell County,” Aaron said. “We have completed an extensive database, with a full interface on our website, and it appears that Williamson County Commissioners are doing something very similar by LRE Water. Why would we be opposed to that?”*

The district updated their current management plan in 2023, required under Chapter 36 Texas Groundwater Law, and is waiting for final approval from the Texas Water Development Board. This management plan is required of all groundwater conservation districts and must be reviewed and updated every five years. In addition, Clearwater’s annual reports and annual financial audits can be found on-line at: [CUWCD Public Records](#)

In 2022 the district modified their rules to manage by zones to better protect and sustain groundwater from the Trinity Aquifer. “We had been deep into preparing for this,” Aaron said. “We started our research for this more than four years before we presented our findings and has been finalized in October 11, 2023”. This effort to develop and defend management zones has cost the district more than \$1.5 million since 2016. Fortunately, our investment has been scientific in nature thus helping us glean a much deeper understanding of the geological formations in Bell County.

“We want to protect the groundwater of across Bell County so that it is available to future generations,” he said. The Clearwater District also has monitors wells across the Bell County and has invested in several wells that are not currently being drawn from, but are there to allow Clearwater to take measurements of the groundwater in various areas of the district.

Clearwater is also very proud that they are a key partner with the Texas Water Development Board and the Governor’s initiative to create a robust advance weather system across Texas. This statewide earth observation network, known as TexMesonet, will be a developed a statewide network delivering near-real-time, quality data to forecasters, modelers, and the general public while managing quality assurance, quality control, and metadata for partner networks. Because of local agreements and support of the Bell County Commissioners Court the State will install this spring six advanced weather stations across Bell County. [TexMesonet Weather Data](#)

There are more than 5,000 groundwater production wells in Bell County, so the quality and quantity of groundwater is important to private landowners as well as the district, Aaron said.

“We are a single-county district, and when we were formed, the taxpayers and owners wanted a single-county district so there would be more accountability and oversight,” Aaron said. “Every year we have met and exceeded our performance goals, and it’s in part because the taxpayers have been able to really oversee what we are doing.”

The Clearwater Underground Water District (CUWCD) has complete transparency of the district rules, management plan, scientific efforts and well data.

Learn more at [CUWCD Website](#)