

MEETING SUMMARY
NATURAL RESOURCES ADVISORY COMMITTEE
February 4, 2010

The February 4th meeting of the Natural Resources Advisory Committee was held in the Houston-Galveston Area Council Conference Room A at 3555 Timmons Lane, Houston, Texas. The meeting began at 1:35 PM. Vice Chairman Pat Buzbee opened the meeting and Chair Dennis Caputo presided upon his arrival.

NRAC voting members present (21):

Jeff Brennan	Kathy Burris	Pat Buzbee
Glenda Callaway	Dennis Caputo	Marilyn Christian
Leroy Dettling	Ronald Drachenberg	Nicole Hausler
David Hubenak	Andrew Isbell	Carole Lamont
Cathy McCoy (phone)	Tom Northrup	John O'Connell (phone)
Ellis Pickett	Ron Schultz	Linda Shead
Brian Shmaefsky	Mike Talbott	Pudge Willcox

NRAC voting members not present (13):

Bill Bandiga	Jamie Brewster	Jim Dannenbaum
Reed Eichelberger	Andy Icken	Jim Joyce
Jim Kachtick	Brett Kolaja	Sarah Metzger
Orval Rhoads	Kerry Whelan	

Jack Miller delegated Nick Aschliman. Lori Traweek delegated Kathy Richolson. Delegated representatives can vote on Committee business; non delegated representatives count toward quorum but cannot vote.

Current Vacancies:

Environmental Groups (1)

NRAC advisory member (1):

Helen Drummond, Galveston Bay Estuary Program

H-GAC Staff Present (7):

Carl Masterson, Rachel Powers, Erin Livingston, Todd Running, Om Chawla, Aubin Phillips, Amy Boyers, Meredith Dang

Others Present:

Kay Willcox (citizen); Mike Lindsay (Montgomery County); Jason Afinowicz (AECOM, Region H)

Certify Quorum

Carl Masterson confirmed a quorum via roll call.

Approve Meeting Report

The meeting report approval was deferred due to a problem with the meeting's email notice.

Membership

Carl asked that the committee consider and vote for the five groups that were nominated to replace the previous environmental group representative. Members present were asked to rank the five groups from one to five with one being their top choice and five being their last choice. Carl will invite someone from the overall top choice to become a member of the NRAC. Results were as follows:

First: Bayou Preservation Association
Second: Katy Prairie Conservancy
Third: Sierra Club and Houston Audubon (Tie)
Fifth: Houston Wilderness

Subcommittees

Parks & Natural Areas

Rachel Powers reported. The 2009 Parks and Natural Areas Awards were presented at a reception on January 19, 2010, following the H-GAC Board meeting. On January 21, 2010, the PNA subcommittee met for their quarterly meeting. At the meeting attendees discussed the awards schedule for 2010 and considered the subcommittee's Annual Plan, discussing what should be accomplished during 2010. Linda is drafting the Annual Plan document. Presentations at the meeting included PlanSource, a cooperative purchasing program for planning services that H-GAC has developed, and the Pedestrian/Bicycle program of H-GAC.

Topics of the Day

Region H Water Plan

Mr. Jason Afinowicz of AECOM, representing the Region H Water Planning Group, reported that the draft plan for the Region H Water Planning Group was approved for comment at the meeting of the group on February 3, 2010.

After describing Region H, Mr. Afinowicz described the task of regional water planning groups in Texas. Generally, these groups look at demand, supplies, and management. Region H is one of 16 in the state.

In Region H, an initial draft of the updated 50-year plan has been developed and public comments are being solicited. Public comments will be incorporated and submitted to the Water Development Board by September 1, 2010. Once regional plans have been received, they will be incorporated into a state plan within one year. Previous plans were developed in 2001 and 2006.

Mr. Afinowicz reviewed sources of data for population forecasts and how those would be used. An analysis of population data show that while growth will occur throughout the region, much of it will be Harris County and municipal demands will represent a larger portion of the water need.

Water supplies are expected to decrease slightly between now and 2060. By comparing demand to supplies, the Group is able to predict a projected deficit.

To address the projected deficit, a variety of management strategies will need to be pursued, including conservation strategies, contractual strategies, groundwater strategies, groundwater reduction plans, reservoir strategies, permit strategies, reuse strategies, infrastructure strategies such as interbasin transfers, and other strategies such as interruptible supplies. Conservation strategies are recommended as the first strategy.

The plan considers protection of water resources, along with other criteria such as cost and yield, as it selects strategies. Thus, water conservation is one of the first strategies. The plan will also consider eight unique stream segments identified by the 2006 Texas Legislature.

Reservoirs play a role in the plan. Several proposed reservoirs will be designated as unique reservoir sites by the Texas Legislature. Some of these sites are included in the plan. Mr. Afinowicz then described several reservoir sites, including two that were selected as strategies in the 2011 plan: Allens Creek Reservoir and Millican Reservoir along the Brazos.

The Group is making recommendations regarding administration and regulation, such as clarifying agency rules to ensure better consistency between regional plans. He then described thirteen legislative recommendations, notably to remove barriers to interbasin transfer of water and for the state to increase funds to study freshwater inflow issues.

Capital costs for the 2011 plan is estimated to be \$12.9 billion (in 2008 dollars). A survey will be conducted to further develop a financing plan.

The 2011 Plan contains information about special studies. One study looks at the impact of 2006 water management strategies on Galveston Bay. A second study looked at conservation and how well it might work.

The Group received comments on the draft, incorporated them, and presented the draft to the Planning Group. The Planning Group approved the Initial Prepared Plans with minor comments at its meeting on February 3, 2010. Public hearings will be held on March 30, April 1, and April 7, 2010. The final plan will be submitted to the Water Development Board by the first of the year.

Q: On the legislative recommendation, are barriers specifically identified in the Plan that prevent interbasin transfers?

A: Some. Junior water rights were an issue, but administrative issues were of greater concern.

Q: A proposed new reservoir like Millican might generate opposition. How would this be addressed?

A: It would be considered, and possibly removed from the plan. More study, especially of advanced conservation, would need to be conducted.

Q: How long did the process for the Bois D'Arc project in the Dallas region take (mentioned in the TPWD magazine)?

A: Not sure.

Q: What is the status of Allens Creek?

A: Currently on hold. The project is approaching a time barrier. Most of the land is owned by the City of Houston, which doesn't need the project right now. BRA and the City of Houston must determine how that proceeds in the near term.

Q: At some point it wasn't legal to do interbasin transferred. Is this still true?

A: It's possible, but the transfers are considered junior rights, which is a major hurdle. This is only an issue during drought. Large interbasin transfers are not encouraged.

Q: Several reservoirs have been in the plan for a while. Why add a new reservoir to the plan instead of including other reservoirs that were already in the plan?

A: Local opposition, insufficient yield from the reservoirs, and highly inconvenient locations that would require interbasin transfers.

Q: Water capture, reuse, water rights... If water is used for irrigation, some of it goes back into the basin, but less than if it discharged otherwise. How is this addressed?

A: This was considered as part of the study on inflows into Galveston Bay. Reuse is attractive because about 60% goes back into the basin... Administratively it creates more water, but it could remove return flows, which are important. The amount of reuse in the plan is relatively small.

Comment: They've proposed transfers in the future. But for now, reuse is being put into place quickly in Region C. The City of Houston reuse application is being considered by TCEQ, although environmental groups have protested because of impact on Galveston Bay.

Q: Is there still funding available for the Luce Bayou transfer?

A: The transfer should be operating by 2020 through a channel adjacent to Luce Bayou from Trinity into Lake Houston.

Comment: Interbasin transfers tend to be perceived as less of an issue, environmentally, when the transfer is between adjacent basins than disparate basins.

Eco-Logical

Amy Boyers and Meredith Dang presented on the Eco-Logical Project. This is an update on Jeff's presentation in May 2009.

Eco-Logical is part of the 2035 Transportation Plan, the long-term plan for the eight-county region. Between now and 2040, we anticipate that 4 million additional people will be in the region. This will necessitate significant new transportation infrastructure. Right now, such projects would go through NEPA and other standard environmental assessments. Eco-Logical would supplement these assessments with long-term coordination of environmental and transportation planning in an effort to conserve high value environmental resources.

Funding for the project came from a Federal Highway Administration pilot grant and the Galveston Bay Estuary Program. An advisory committee has provided guidance through this process.

The first task of the project was to map the ecotypes in the eight-county region. Next, quantitative metrics were developed that could be processed within a GIS. Size, shape, quality, level of threat and isolation were considered, along with a quality metric specific to each ecotype.

Eco-Logical will be presented to the Transportation Policy Council in 2012 for inclusion in the 2040 Regional Transportation Plan. It is hoped that this will be used by other agencies.

Based on projected development in the region it is estimated that 35% of coastal prairies, 47% of bottomland forest, 52% of upland forest and 74% of tidal wetlands will be lost.

Amy then demonstrated the draft web application, which is located at http://www.acgis.h-gac.com/Eco_logical_GIS/default.aspx. On the map, generally speaking, darker colors are more valuable than lighter colors. By clicking on a polygon, the application would provide a score for the polygon, including all the elements of that score and a comparison to similar features.

For transportation purposes, you can draw a line and the application will analyze the area confined within a buffer of the line and provide an index score. Some scores would be identified as environmental resources of greatest concern, and progressively lesser concern. Users could define their own priorities within the framework to weight different criteria.

This application can be used through a web browser as well as through a streaming application for GIS programs. The data is not yet complete, so it cannot yet be used.

Amy asked that the group consider identifying parties that might be able to use this tool and would be receptive to a presentation.

Q: Do more features become visible as you zoom in?

A: Yes.

Q: When would our GIS groups be able to use this?

A: Possibly within a month.

Comment: No organization puts all planning processes together. This application looks like it comes close.

303(d) List of Impaired Waters

Todd Running provided a report on changes to the state list of impaired waters. This list is available for comment. In our region, the H-GAC Clean Rivers Program addresses one river and three coastal basins.

The Basin Highlights Report is coming up, and as part of this we review the 303(d) list of impaired waters. Most of the data comes through the Clean Rivers Program, which includes eight partners and more than 310 sites that are monitored at least quarterly.

There are 189 new listings in the H-GAC region consisting of 62 new listings for bacteria, 18 for dissolved oxygen (DO), 54 for PCBs, and 44 for Dioxin.

Some good news was reported. Five non-tidal Assessment Units (AUs) in Clear Creek are coming off the list for DO, largely because of an effort to cap abandoned oil wells. Also, 11 streams are showing significant improvements for bacteria, largely in Buffalo Bayou and the Houston Ship Channel, but also one each in Burnett Bay and Greens Bayou. The differences represent up to a 90% decrease in bacteria levels. (Burnett Bay has the Enterococcus standard.)

However, six streams have shown significant increases in bacteria levels—fairly scattered throughout the region. Increases are, in some instances, more than a ten-fold increase.

What H-GAC staff want to know is why we are seeing changes. We'll be asking the BIG at its February 16, 2010, meeting to suggest what sorts of changes have been made in these waterways that might account for the changes.

Other waterways, where projects have been completed, have started to show improvement, even if the changes are not yet statistically significant.

Q: Will the Basin Highlights Report identify the causes for these new impairments?

A: Sixteen are newly assessed areas. The PCBs and Dioxins were added because of new advisories from the Department of State Health Services.

Environmental Program Highlights

Todd asked that the committee members consider looking at H-GAC's new Water Resources Inventory Map (WRIM). The website for this brand new program is http://www.h-gac.com/rds/water_quality/default.aspx.

Aubin Phillips provided a summary of the San Bernard Watershed Protection Plan process. Three kick-off meetings were held in November. About 75 attendees provided input about concerns in the watershed. The first Stakeholder meeting was held the previous week. Kathy Burris and David Hubenak both attended the kick-off meeting in Sealy. Kathy had been expecting to see more pollutants upstream where mining and development has been occurring. David was similarly surprised.

Om Chawla provided an update on the Bastrop Bayou Watershed Plan initiated in 2004. The draft plan is ready for comment at http://www.h-gac.com/community/water/watershed_protection/bastrop_bayou.aspx. Please visit the site, review the document, and consider making comments. As an alternative to the 200-page document, H-GAC is developing an 8 to 10 page executive summary which should be available shortly. One section of Bastrop Bayou, in the urbanized area of Angleton, will be added to the 2010 list of impaired waters.

Justin Bower provided an update on the Westfield Estates Watershed Protection Plan. Westfield Estates is a subdivision in unincorporated Harris County just north of the City of Houston. Sampling and analysis indicated that bacteria from failing on-site sewage facilities (OSSFs), wildlife, and waste from domestic animals were creating an acute public health issue. The long-term plan is to connect the houses to a sanitary sewer system and wastewater treatment plant. A short-term plan includes some repair of OSSFs as well as homeowner education appropriate to the neighborhood.

Q: Where are you planning to get funding from for the sanitary sewer system and wastewater treatment plant?

A: The cost was estimated at about \$16 million for an eight-street neighborhood. The East Aldine Improvement District, Harris County Precinct 2, and Sunbelt water Supply District are working to identify funding sources.

Rachel Powers provided an update on the Bacteria Implementation Group. The group has been meeting monthly since July 2008. The group is in the process of drafting the Implementation Plan that will address needed reductions in bacteria. Once the draft is completed H-GAC staff will be seeking formal support for the plan. It will be submitted to TCEQ in August.

Roundtable Discussion

- Linda Shead reported that Double Bayou is undergoing additional analysis to determine if a Watershed Protection Plan will be initiated on this stream. Monitoring will be conducted in the spring and fall.
- Carole Lamont reported that Precinct 3 is looking to expand its Adopt-a-County-Waterway clean-up program.
- Ron Drachenberg reported Fort Bend County is expanding its storm water program and providing book covers to schools.
- Glenda Callaway reported that the Environmental Flows Advisory group Expert Science Team made two recommendations. The stakeholders have three months to finalize their recommendation to TCEQ.
- Patrick Buzbee reported Montgomery County is initiating its Phase II MS4 permit.
- Dennis reported that after the roundtable, the group will discuss future topics.
- Tom Northrup reported that he travelled with his wife on botanical expeditions through blizzards.
- Ron Schultz reported that Galveston County has been focusing on storm water as they are beginning year three of their five-year permit. The county is working with small MS4 communities drafting interlocal agreements to share resources to get everything completed.
- David Hubenak reported the Allen Creek Reservoir project is currently on hold. Failing OSSFs are a problem that they are dealing with in Austin County.
- Carl reported that he will be retiring by January of 2011 at the latest, after more than 33 years with H-GAC.

Dennis expressed the sentiment that the committee will not be the same without Carl. He will be missed.

Dennis asked for suggestions of topics for future presents. Pat Buzbee will accept those suggestions, preferably by e-mail. Dennis, Carl, and Pat will consider the suggestions and develop a plan of topics for the next two years. Controversial topics were welcomed.

Next Meeting Date

The next regularly scheduled meeting date is Thursday, May 6, 2010, at 1:30 PM.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 3:26 PM.