

Bobby + Darlia Hobbs

MAYOR MONCRIEF MADE A TERRIBLE GAS WELL ORDINANCE
the city has the power to control distance from

OPINION

6A

Star-Telegram.com/opinion

Star-Telegram

Tuesday, December 14, 2010

District should stand its ground on gas leases

Editorial Fort Worth trustees should use their leasing leverage to keep drilling sites away from schools.

The Fort Worth school board is in a high-stakes face-off with the Barnett Shale's most powerful natural gas companies. Board members must not back down.

On the one hand, Chesapeake Energy, Finley Resources, Quicksilver Resources, Vantage Fort Worth Energy and XTO Energy are offering almost \$25 million for mineral rights leases on 40 sites owned by the school district. Most of the sites are schools.

On the other hand, there is reason for heightened concern about what nearby natural gas drilling might mean for the health and safety of children in

those schools.

The money is substantial and would come as schools in Fort Worth and statewide have been hit with funding shortfalls and face the threat of cutbacks in state aid when the Legislature meets in January.

But the health and safety concerns are just too great. The need for caution outweighs the need for money.

An independent consultant studying potentially hazardous natural gas site emissions for Fort Worth has reported gas leaks at 68 percent of the sites tested.

The staff of the Texas Commission on Environ-

mental Quality, in a recommendation for stronger regulation of oil and gas sites, has said that current state laws are outdated and that excessive emissions have been "historically underreported."

On Monday, a leak at an XTO well created a vapor cloud in north Fort Worth.

The school board has discussed some of the leases since October and has twice delayed action. A board policy says drilling sites must not be located within 1,200 feet of schools or school property. Two sites targeting three properties in a 14-tract bid package violate that standard.

Trustee Juan Rangel

persuaded his fellow board members to table consideration of that package in October while he worked on ways to address the proximity of drilling sites to Daggett Montessori, Richard J. Wilson Elementary and a school-owned lot across the street from Daggett.

Rangel worked out an agreement with XTO Energy, the successful bidder on the Daggett Montessori and Wilson Elementary sites. The agreement attempted to require safety measures such as air quality testing at the schools, but it was poorly written and clearly needed more work.

The board members

could have rejected the problem leases at their Nov. 16 meeting. But an XTO spokesman told them the company would still drill near the schools to reach its other mineral leases.

If that didn't rub trustees the wrong way, it should have.

They discussed the matter in an executive session, and board President Ray Dickerson announced that the board would not discuss the pending lease packages again until March.

Just 27 days later, an expanded list of gas leases is on the board's agenda today — with the three problem properties removed. Strategically, that's a bad move for the district.

The school board has no authority to keep gas drilling sites away from schools. That authority rests with city and state officials.

The board's only leverage lies in its power to deny all leases to companies that insist on drilling too close. To give up that leverage, move forward with other leases and ignore the threat to Daggett and Wilson would be a mistake.

Some board members also worry that if the district does not sign the leases before the end of the year the companies will back away.

If that is true, company officials should openly say so.

The school board must stand firm and enforce its policy against drilling within 1,200 feet of schools.

shs
ut

Council to consider funding for air study

Fort Worth The gas-well testing will cost \$400,000 more than originally envisioned.

By John Henry
jfhenny@star-telegram.com

FORT WORTH — A study to examine the effects of natural gas drilling on air quality will cost about \$400,000 more than the City Council appropriated.

The council will decide tonight whether to approve the extra money from the city's gas-lease revenue fund to finish the study as originally outlined. The new cost is \$1,052,448, compared with the original \$650,000.

Council members appear to be at least as interested in making sure the city gets solid scientific findings for its money as they are in the rising price tag.

Though they don't oppose further analysis, District 3 Councilman Zim Zimmerman and District 4 Councilman Danny Scarth wonder whether finishing the testing is necessary to merit a "scientifically valid" study. Scarth said that a 20 percent sample would be more than adequate to make a scientific judgment.

"I'm not sure it's going to help the credibility of the testing to do that other 25 percent of the sites," Zimmerman said.

Information gleaned from a credible study is the council's ultimate goal and why members last month embraced increasing the funding — possibly as much as \$250,000, they were told — to see to it that the testing goal of 75 percent of the city's active well sites was met.

Eastern Research Group now says it needs \$351,000 to do that. With the funding, according to a staff report, Eastern will be able to point-source test 180 more well sites for a total of 380 and meet a revised completion deadline of June.

Eastern said in October that it could not meet the original contract terms to test 75 percent of the city's active gas wells. Half the sites have been tested, and 68 percent of those show emissions of some sort.

Some officials wonder whether winter is the best time for testing, though the answer depends on which scientist you ask. The lower temperatures in this case should not affect the point-source testing, which collects samples at the source, said Michael Gange, the city's assistant environmental director.

"The gas coming out of the ground is 90 to 150 degrees Fahrenheit as it's extracted from the ground," Gange said. "The gas will be hot enough as opposed to the ambient temperatures."

Eastern did both point-source and ambient testing in the summer.

The money figure, Gange said, is fixed and will not increase, which is something the council asked for at a briefing in November. Funding for other additional costs in the study is also sought, including project management and further canister analysis from the first phase of testing.

"I think it is better for us to have too much information than not enough," Mayor Mike Moncrief said last month. "I can't think of a better use of" the gas-revenue funds.

Most council members have expressed support for additional testing.

"If we have gas drilling emissions problems I'd

Miss. Dec. 14, 2010 Star-Telegram

Static

Forget 'Don't Drink the Water,' How about 'Don't Ignite the Water.'"

Sometimes Static's editor feels like it's dangerous to open her e-mail inbox on Tuesdays, deadline day at your beloved Fort Worth Weekly. You never know what kind of news might be lying in wait there, among the Viagra offers, what might, um, arise that requires instantaneous changes or angst over being unable to make them.

That's OK though. Being afraid to open the e-mail is a lot better than being afraid to open the water tap for fear your house might explode.

That's what some folks in southern Parker County apparently are facing. On Tuesday evening, the Environmental Protection Agency issued an "imminent and substantial danger order" to Range Resources, a natural gas outfit, in connection with one of the company's wells. The order comes on the heels of tests by the EPA of two nearby residential water wells. According to the EPA press release, the water wells were found to be contaminated with "extremely high levels

of methane" that "pose an imminent and substantial risk of explosion or fire." The two water wells were also found to contain benzene, a cancer-causing agent.

The EPA has ordered Range Resources to immediately implement a full-scale investigation of the situation and additionally ordered the Fort Worth company to deliver drinking water to the two residences, test all nearby water wells to determine the extent of aquifer contamination, and "develop a plan to remediate areas of the aquifer that have been contaminated," among other things.

The findings in Parker County come within three months of an EPA finding in Pavillion, Wyo., location of heavy gas drilling activity, that the water supply in that town was so contaminated with methane that it was undrinkable. Not only that, the agency said, if residents even use the water to shower, they should open their bathroom windows to vent the possibility of methane buildup that could lead to explosions. But you know, natural gas is so clean ... so safe.

Don't Miss the Bus

So, did you think there was something missing in the above item? Like, maybe, what were state regulators doing while

those wells in Parker County were going bad?

So glad you asked! Static doesn't know that answer, but there is a hearing scheduled in Austin on Dec. 15 at which a whole lot of people are likely to be asking similar questions. It's a "sunset" hearing on the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Railroad Commission. Sunset, as in, these agencies have to justify their continued existence. In effect, it's a chance for the public to come testify about why those agencies should be reformed and required to actually use taxpayer dollars to protect the environment and the health of taxpayers.

If you have \$40 and the intestinal fortitude to get up and get on a bus at 5:30 a.m. that day for the trip to Austin, then you should immediately — as in, on Wednesday as early as possible — contact the North Central Texas Communities Alliance at nctc Alliance@yahoo.com to reserve your seat.

People will be coming from all over the state for the hearing, said NCTCA President Esther McElfish. She's hot that the Texas Sunset Commission — the commissioners themselves, not the agency staff — took so long to confirm the Dec. 15 date, giving her group and other environmental groups so little time to make their plans. Despite that, she said, "I think we'll see a tremendous response."