

Bayou pollution exceeds federal standards

By Chris Paschenko
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DICKINSON — With fish dying from depleted oxygen levels and increased bacteria counts posing public-health concerns, advocates for a healthier Dickinson Bayou say development along its watershed won't help the tidal-water body meet federal clean-water standards.

But former rice fields and farmland along the bayou's 100-square-mile watershed make the area ripe for development.

Enter Lago Mar, a proposed commercial and residential development that could add 7,000 homes on 3,350 acres in Texas City. A portion of the development's storm water could, based on preliminary drawings, flow into the bayou's watershed.

The development's boundaries fit like a jigsaw puzzle against federally designated urban areas.

"Depending on whether or not it is in an urbanized area, as defined by storm-water regulations, they may or may not be a regulated source," said Roger Miranda, a geochemist with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Miranda said the bayou is impaired because it fails to meet federal clean-water standards.

He is working on studies scheduled for release this fall and winter that should determine how much daily pollution the bayou can absorb without threatening public health or the health of the bayou itself.

"Samples show the stream may not contain an amount of dissolved oxygen that water-quality standards say it should," he said.

"The other study is bacteria, fecal coliform and E. coli. That's a concern for contact recreation."

The bayou is a tidal-water stream, so pollutants aren't easily flushed from it at times, which can aggravate the problem.

Through computer models, Miranda is attempting to simulate normal conditions in the bayou to track pollutants.

"There is an issue with the dissolved oxygen standard," he said. "We're not sure whether the bayou naturally could meet the standard."

Bud Solmonsson, a Dickinson Bayou watershed manager with Texas A&M University, said storm-water runoff from developed property, such as oil or petroleum from parking lots or chemicals from lawns, would add to the bayou's problems.

"When you want to fix the impairment, you have to reverse what's happening, by trying to educate people to reduce runoff, whether from point sources or nonpoint sources," he said.

"You have to ask the developers if they believe they can harness any harmful acts, so that the runoff doesn't end up in the bayou by way of mitigating it with detention ponds, green space or things like that," he said.

Phil Conway, chief operating officer for Land Tejas Texas City, said he didn't know the state had declared the bayou impaired.

"We're doing such micro-planning at this point. We haven't begun to focus on exactly how runoff will set forth to Dickinson Bayou," he said.

Other developments under the company's direction have discharged storm water into impaired tributaries.

"As I recall, there were extra steps we had to take before water was discharged into the stream," Conway said.

"As you go up the bayou to the north side, there are some sizable proposed developments, if not, in fact, existing developments, that put additional discharge into the bayou."

He said the company would abide by state regulations.

"The bottom line is that, until the studies are completed, we won't know what is required of us and what needs to be done to keep the bayou in good shape," he said.

Meanwhile, Dickinson residents at public hearings continue to voice concerns about the Lago Mar development, saying the time to plan for the future of the bayou is now.