



## Recent Media Articles

### Houston Voters Will Have Big Say on State Water Plan

By Ross Ramsey, Texas Tribune  
September 16, 2013

The wettest part of the state will have an outsized say in the state's water planning.

Houston, with a mayoral race and the "eighth wonder of the world" on the ballot, could account for one-third of the votes in November's constitutional-amendment election on \$1.1 billion for water projects around the state.

In places like Wichita Falls and San Antonio and almost anywhere west of Interstate 35, lots of lawns are brown and crunchy and much of the countryside is parched. Cities all over the state restrict water use, limiting the number of times each week — and sometimes which hours of the day — residents can water their plants and grass.

In some places, utilities have banned outdoor use of water altogether, with exceptions only for livestock. In others, customers can water but can't use anything other than hand-held hoses and nozzles.

It is easy to make some assumptions about whether those dry-country voters will support money for water projects that could ease the effects of this and future droughts.

In places where the lawns are still green and relatively unthreatened, however, voter awareness of the state's water problems may fall behind other concerns, like what to do with the giant hunk of concrete and steel known as the Astrodome. What was once billed as the eighth wonder of the world by


exuberant boosters is now shuttered. Harris County voters will decide in November whether to spend up to \$217 million to remake the facility into a convention and exhibition space.

Some of those voters — those who live in the city of Houston itself — may be more interested in deciding whether to re-elect or replace Annise Parker, the mayor since 2010 and an elected city official since 1998. She faces challengers with money, notably Ben Hall, and that may be the sort of contentious campaign that attracts voter attention.

Those two issues — whether to keep the mayor and whether to refurbish the world's biggest sports barn — are the biggest things on the November ballot in the state's biggest city. Other city elections and issues are tepid by comparison.

Harris County accounts for more votes than any other county in a normal election. This year, with the mayor's office and the Astrodome generating attention and without comparably alluring issues on other ballots around the state, it will probably play a bigger role than usual.

In last year's general election, 14.9 percent of the Texas votes were cast in Harris County. In the forthcoming November election, political experts inside and outside Houston are predicting that more than 30 percent of the statewide votes will come out of Harris. Other places are big in normal elections,



and Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Fort Worth and El Paso will be big this time. But not like Houston.

All of that tells the water promoters where to go. Once there, they have some selling to do. In most of those cities, they'll be talking to voters with crunchy lawns.

"Houston will be about 35 percent of the vote," said Mustafa Tameez, a Houston political consultant who has been advising industrial clients on the election. He is not convinced that Houston's voters are highly concerned about water. "I don't know how an urban population will look at this. You turn on the faucet, and water comes out. We haven't had a lot of rationing."

Houston's water department has customers on voluntary water restrictions, encouraging conservation but not doing anything to punish people who water more

than the recommended amount. And the conventional wisdom has more to do with flooding than with drought: people like to say the problem in Houston is with too much water and in the wrong places.

The campaigns on behalf of the constitutional amendment will start working on voters in the next few weeks. They are still raising money for those efforts now, and it may actually help to have the voters concentrated in major urban areas — the better to focus the advertising — rather than scattered all over the state.

Their worry is that the biggest source of votes is on the rainy side of the state, and that opponents may jump in late with an appeal against bond debt and state spending.

They will probably find the answer in Houston.

## Huge campaign to fund water projects on tap

By David Saleh Rauf, Houston Chronicle  
September 24, 2013

AUSTIN — A political-style campaign projected to leverage upward of \$1 million to sway voter approval for a ballot proposition to fund new water projects is about to debut across Texas.

Lawmakers in the past legislative session agreed to tap \$2 billion from the state's rainy day fund in what some called a historic effort to address long-neglected state water needs.

The catch: Texas voters have the final say on whether to use the state's piggy bank to pay for water infrastructure projects. The water measure is labeled Proposition 6 on the ballot and is one of nine constitutional amendments that Texans will decide on Nov. 5.

Supporters are laying the groundwork for an aggressive effort to educate voters and drown out opposition with roughly one month before early voting starts. A coalition of political action committees and business groups are leading the push.

The strategy will be bankrolled by a combination of those forces. A political action committee named Water Texas created specifically for the campaign is being led by House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, and Rep. Allan Ritter, R-Nederland.

### 'Can't risk losing'

Like any high-powered campaign, the political playbook for the water proposition is set to include television and radio ads, direct mailers, phone banks, op-ed pieces and stump-like speeches, as well as meetings with local leaders. A heavy dose of Web and social media activity also is part of the formula.

In all, supporters are gearing for a potential multimillion-dollar campaign.

"We can't risk losing this election. It's too important for the future of the state," said Bill Hammond, president and CEO of the Texas Association of Business, one of a number of groups backing the strategy. "This is just like any candidate who has to go out there and do

the blocking and tackling to make sure they win an election."

### Straus hits road

Early building blocks of the campaign already are taking shape.

House leaders have lined up more than 150 lawmakers from both chambers to be part of a so-called leadership team to spread the gospel of Proposition 6 at the local level. The effort is expected to include Gov. Rick Perry and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst.


Straus already is hitting the road to sell the plan in person. Last week, he held court on the water measure with local leaders in drought-plagued Amarillo. He will do the same in Dallas and Houston soon and will spend the next six weeks meeting with elected officials and business leaders throughout Texas to "highlight the importance of securing a long-term water supply for cities, industry and farmers."

"There is broad support among Texans for ensuring a reliable water supply for our children and grandchildren," Straus said, "and I am confident that Water Texas will succeed in our effort to pass Proposition 6 in November."

### Grass-roots groups

The campaign-style tactics are not uncommon for high-profile ballot propositions. In 2005, a combination of political groups spent more than \$1.2 million over a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

The water measure is nowhere near as controversial. It has drummed up opposition from fiscal conservatives, however, who chastised lawmakers during the regular session for agreeing to tap the state's rainy day fund to pay for water projects. They also argue that using the \$2 billion in a constitutionally dedicated fund allows supporters to skirt having the money count against a state spending cap, which conservatives have promised to protect.



As a result, a slew of grass-roots groups have pledged to oppose the measure, calling it the equivalent of a water slush fund.

“The coalition hasn’t gelled yet, but, I guarantee you, we’ll have a coalition,” said Linda Curtis, director of Independent Texans, a Bastrop-based grass-roots group that recently released a report critical of Proposition 6 called the “Water Heist Amendment.”

#### **Poll shows support**

A May poll from Texas A&M University suggested that Texans will support the water plan, which would create a revolving, low-interest loan program to finance water supply projects over the next half century.

House leaders who crafted the legislation say the \$2 billion capitalization could finance the state’s entire long-range water plan, which identifies 562 projects needed to satisfy the demands of a growing population during the next 50 years. It is being pitched as a crucial component to keep the state’s economic engine humming into the future.

#### **Throwing money**

Critics say the plan still does not entirely solve the state’s water problems. “It’s kind of easy to throw money at the issue when you got money, as opposed to taking a hard look at fundamental underlying policies that restrict the supply of water where it’s needed,” said Chuck DeVore, vice president of policy at

the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Supporters of the water measure expect the thrust of media buys to begin airing around the state in the next couple of weeks, coinciding with the start of early voting Oct. 21. The first salvo from the water groups is scheduled to pop up by the end of this month: a billboard on Interstate 35 in Austin, paid for by the Texas Farm Bureau, which is planning to spend money on a variety of other outreach efforts supporting Proposition 6.

#### **Focusing message**

Part of the challenge for supporters will be tailoring the message to different regions of the state, said Mark Lehman, vice president of governmental affairs for the Texas Association of Realtors, which is getting ready to pump big dollars behind the push.



## Texas In Need Of A Long-Term Water Plan

By Steve Short, Texas Public Radio

February 12, 2013

When it comes to water in Texas, unless you're a farmer, most people in the state don't care.

A public opinion poll conducted by faculty members at the University of Texas in association with the Texas Tribune found that the economy, immigration and education are top of mind for most, yet water registers as a top issue with only 4 percent.

Mike Barnett with the Texas Farm Bureau said that rural Texans understand burn bans, dry wells and short pastures. Drought is not a word, it's a reality they live with every day. He added that for most urban Texans, water is something that comes out of the tap -- every time.

There's plenty to keep the lawn green, and

there's plenty to keep the pool brimming. Urban areas are an oasis in a sea of Texas brown. And that's a dangerous mirage for our future.

The Texas legislature is paying attention, and both Texas House and Senate leadership have expressed the need this session to kick start the plan with revenue from the Rainy Day Fund.

But there's also a danger.

Agriculture is still the top water user in the state, and Barnett said that as water gets more expensive and sources disappear, a clamor could arise to take agriculture's water, drying up livelihoods, a rich agriculture heritage and ultimately, the food supply.