

Adversaries working together? What a concept!

by Scott Stroud

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It may seem like all that stands between developers and new building projects are the sluggish economy and any pangs of conscience they might feel. But one developer last spring actually worked with local environmentalists to shore up protections for the Edwards Aquifer.

The resulting tweaks to a planned apartment complex along Babcock Road on the Northwest Side provided additional protections for San Antonio's precious water source - and the developer walked away happy.

The episode showed the value of bringing everyone to the table, a lesson city leaders should take to heart.

"It was a sensitive site over the aquifer, and we talked a lot with Annalisa's group, and I thought it made the project better," said Stephen Drenner, the developers' attorney.

Annalisa's group is the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, of which Annalisa Peace is the executive director. At the urging of then-Mayor Phil Hardberger, planners of a 24-acre apartment complex near the University of Texas at San Antonio met with GEAA back in the spring and acceded to its request to modify their proposal.

The changes weren't expensive and ultimately might save money for the developers, American Campus Communities.

The proposed apartment complex was postponed for two weeks last March after Hardberger raised his question about it. The result was a three-page agreement outlining revisions to the plan, which won approval with GEAA's endorsement.

Essentially, the developer agreed to use a set of storm water runoff practices recommended but not required by the Environmental Protection Agency. Low Impact Development practices involve filtering runoff through natural vegetation rather than diverting it from the property through a drainage basin and culverts.

Drainage is important because the property lies in the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone and a creek runs through it. Providing natural filtration makes it less likely that the runoff will contain contaminants as it re-enters the aquifer.

Drenner said the developer found dealing with GEAA relatively painless – and blessedly devoid of surprise objections at City Council meetings.

"I was impressed with how they went about it," he said.

The episode offers a model for how development should be handled, but as the recent approval for development of Steubing Ranch on the North Side shows, we don't always follow our models.

Peace said she sought a similar meeting with the developers of that project, which was approved by City Council last week. But she didn't approach the developers directly, and her efforts to have the council broker such a meeting failed.

She asked Councilwoman Elisa Chan to set something up but never got an answer. Chan said Peace weighed in late on a process that had lasted for months and didn't offer constructive solutions - although it's not clear she ever got the chance.

But that's the way it often goes with development in San Antonio. The lesson of the Babcock Road project is that talking to everyone who's interested doesn't hurt.

Sometimes it even helps.