

Mr. Krier cries “Wolf” over Flooding

As the City of San Antonio moves toward consideration of its 2017 Bond Issue, voters will be asked to approve up to \$850 million in projects. Some of these projects are clearly much-needed while others appear frivolous or even regressive. But whether vital or questionable, all of these Bond Issue projects will help shape the metropolitan area in which another million people will come to live over the next two decades. Voters in District 9, as elsewhere in the City, must carefully evaluate how every penny of that money is to be spent.

It is no secret to most San Antonians that our basic infrastructure, consisting of a great number of roads, sidewalks, and drainage systems is in urgent need of repair. More than one hundred “low spots” in roads -- caused in many cases by Developers simply paving over stream beds, pitted streets due to use of poor materials and eroded by sharp runoff, and home flooding due to impervious cover such as large parking lots near commercial buildings, all contribute to the woes we face during and after heavy rains.

It is easy to blame all of these problems on “bad luck” or Acts of God. But the truth of the matter is that many of the flooding and drainage problems in urban areas are due to Developers using cheap and quick methods, asphaltting over huge areas, clear cutting trees and vegetation, and ignoring creeks and natural drainage areas. We used to think that we could control flooding with ever more asphalt and concrete, but the past half century attempting to fight Nature has proven that we have to work with Mom Nature if we are to help our City reduce flooding.

Why can Developers get away with paving over huge areas such as parking lots without regard to the way water behaves – thereby actually promoting flooding of homes? The reason is that our City Code is weak and some twenty to thirty years behind comparable Codes in many other cities. Only when the public has had enough of flooding and “ponding” and demands that the Code be strengthened will there be any hope of change for the better.

A May 2010 study produced by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management notes that runoff from a one acre asphalted parking lot is 16 times greater than from a natural acre. They state: *“Under natural forested conditions, only about 10% of precipitation runs off the surface of the site, 50% soaks into the ground, and a surprising 40% is taken up by trees and other vegetation and sent back into the atmosphere through the process of [transpiration.] As roads and houses are built, this ratio starts to change, with runoff increasing as the amount of impervious cover increases. For example, the total runoff volume for a one-acre parking lot is about 16 times that produced by an undeveloped one-acre meadow (CWP 2000). Therefore it’s understandable why suburban and urban communities have more severe flooding than undeveloped areas.”*

Conventional asphalt, being petroleum-based, and having no porosity, prevents water from soaking into the ground. Since the water cannot percolate into the water table, it has nowhere to go but downhill to lower levels – often draining into private homes and streets since the City’s stormwater system is not constructed using current scientific understanding. Clear cutting hillsides, paving over creeks, and especially paving huge parking lots (impervious cover) removes the natural ability of the earth to soak up the extra rainfall during heavy storms. As water is concentrated into ever-greater amounts it gathers speed and force. When concentrated, an acre of water -- even if only one inch deep on the parking lot -- can provide a torrent capable of knocking down walls, eroding streets, and even tossing cars aside.

In a recent all-hands memo to voters, CM Krier issued the following statement regarding his position on impervious cover: *“I also questioned the wisdom of expanding impervious cover restrictions from the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, where they are in force currently, to the entire City. This sweeping move would have driven up housing costs, and would have done so without a firm scientific justification.”* (emphasis added)

One wonders how a man like Mr. Krier can be ignorant of more than thirty years of scientific justification for reducing or removing impervious cover. Twenty or more states (to include Texas) and the U.S. Geological Survey have published extensive research on the perils of impervious cover and its causal relationship to flooding, water pollution, “ponding” (which breeds mosquitoes and flies), erosion of roadways, and many other ills. To make such a statement in total ignorance (or was he merely ignoring the facts) speaks poorly of a man elected to serve constituents victimized by flooding.

Simply put, less impervious cover results in less flooding. In those cases where impervious cover is necessary, its negative effects can (and must) be managed by each property that creates the runoff before it runs into public roads or drainage ways. This is hardly news, and even if one has been a Boy or Girl Scout, you understand the basics of “soil and water conservation.” One has to wonder whether Mr. Krier’s public policy position is due to his own simple ignorance – and failure to have his staff do its homework on this issue -- or to political influences from the Development community.

Mr. Krier was president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce for twenty years, and we thank him for his past service in that capacity. But today he is the elected representative of the people of Council District 9 rather than the promoter of Developer interests. The interests of homeowners who have been victimized by flooding, or commuters who have had to negotiate around “low spots,” are quite different from the interests of the Development community. The Developers, understandably, wish to do things as quickly and cheaply as possible, charge the highest price possible for the biggest possible “bottom line.” The San Antonio taxpayer gets to pay the costs of dealing with flooding and erosion.

We must stop making the situation worse and require all new development to manage stormwater onsite. As older areas of the city redevelop, more land needs to be restored to natural conditions and our Code should require some measure of stormwater management on each property. Only in this way can we stop creating problems for taxpayers and, over time, fix the sins of the past in a sustainable way that protects private homeowners and reduces tax burdens.

Citizens who are homeowners, commuters, and taxpayers deserve better quality public roads, improved stormwater controls, and less flooding. Clearly, the interests of Developers and those of citizens are sharply at odds. The upcoming Bond Issue can provide funds to improve streets and alleviate flooding problems. Or millions can be wasted continuing with 1950’s construction techniques featuring impervious cover that do nothing to help improve ordinary peoples’ lives. Progressive cities know that quality of life is one of the most significant factors to attract and keep more sophisticated businesses that can provide higher wages. These more advanced businesses choose cities that look at the full spectrum of social, economic, and environmental factors when determining where and when to locate.

Mr. Krier needs your help in deciding whether he is still a Chamber president of the Past or wishes to be our Council rep for our Future. Please help him make up his mind.

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