

Hillwood hangs on to 3 Circle T utility districts

By Steve Stein
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WESTLAKE -- Hillwood Development Corp. officials say they have no immediate plans to dissolve three municipal utility districts, despite Westlake's admittance into a regional wastewater system.

Town officials say that there is no need for the districts at Hillwood's Circle T Ranch now that Westlake is expected to be able to provide water and sewer services to the community of 270 residents. Last week, an advisory committee accepted Westlake into the Denton Creek Regional Wastewater System, a milestone in the town's efforts to provide utilities.

Officials from Hillwood, owned by Ross Perot Jr., said yesterday that dissolving the three Circle T districts has always been contingent on Westlake agreeing to reimburse Hillwood for projects on Circle T. No agreement has been finalized.

In 1998, the two sides reached a settlement, ending years of conflict that almost led to dismantling the town.

As part of the agreement, which cleared the way for Fidelity Investments to build a regional campus in Westlake, Hillwood agreed to dissolve the utility districts. The districts pose potential competition to Westlake providing water and sewer services.

The agreement also called on Westlake to reimburse Hillwood for part of Circle T development. Hillwood plans to build subdivisions, golf courses and a shopping center on the ranch, which covers more than 60 percent of the town.

At issue is how much money and for what projects Westlake must pay.

Although there has been some progress, Mayor Scott Bradley said, a "fundamental difference in philosophy" exists between the town and Hillwood.

"They want reimbursement from the public for developing their own property," Bradley said. "We don't think developers should use public dollars to underwrite their own projects."

Mike Berry, president of Hillwood Properties, a division of Hillwood, said yesterday that the company has acted in good faith regarding the districts' operation and that the two sides are making progress on the finance plan.

He said Town Manager Trent Petty has been flexible while working to reach an agreement that is acceptable to both sides.

"I think we're working very well together. We're in regular conversations. And we're meeting on other issues besides the finance plan," Berry said.

Hillwood and Westlake engineers have been working together on the design of a four-mile waterline from U.S. 377 to the Fidelity construction site off Texas 114. They hope to present plans to the Westlake Board of Alderman as early as Monday, Berry said.

The waterline, worth more than \$3 million, will serve Fidelity and Westlake, including Circle T.

Although the advisory committee for Trinity River Authority's Denton Creek Regional Wastewater System agreed to admit Westlake, the move must be approved by the authority's board and the town's aldermen. Once the town receives final approval, which is considered a formality, Westlake will be able to provide sewer services for new developments. Most current residents have septic systems.

Westlake gets its water from Fort Worth, although many residents have wells.

If the Circle T districts dissolve, they would still have liabilities and assets related to their 12-year membership in the wastewater system, authority spokesman John Jadrosich said yesterday.

"We've never had any experience with anybody withdrawing from our system," Jadrosich said.

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