

CAPTAIN'S LOG

Protect Lake Travis Association

ISSUE 1

SPRING 1983

GOVERNOR'S SELECT COMMITTEE ASKS FOR "NO DISCHARGE"

A ban on sewage discharge into Lakes Travis and Austin was unanimously recommended March 3 by the Governor's Select Committee on Water Quality Standards. The ban includes Lake Marble Falls, the Pedernales River for 15 miles above Lake Travis, and all other tributaries to Lakes Travis and Austin.

Communities currently discharging sewage into the lakes (Travis Vista, Burnet and Marble Falls) would be allowed one more permit period (usually five years) before being asked to comply. Burnet disposes of its sewage primarily through irrigation. Marble Falls is building a new sewage treatment plant.

The Committee recommendations will be presented to the Governor and to the Texas Department of Water Resources.

The Committee found current water standards inadequate to preserve lake uses such as general water supply, direct drinking water with disinfection, and contact recreation including sports which are dependent on water clarity. In its report, the Committee urged "that the water quality standards be amended and upgraded so that the uses be preserved, and additional parameters, nitrogen, phosphorous, clarity and biological indicators should be included.

Other Committee recommendations include a regional agency to build non-polluting sewage treatment plants and to regulate urban runoff, and a comprehensive water testing program.

Protect Lake Travis Association President, Taylor Ollmann, a Committee member, said, "There are two things we must do if we want to keep our lakes clean. We must both keep out sewage and limit severely any increases in runoff pollution.

"There are many ways to dispose of sewage away from the lakes and streams. Some are as cheap or cheaper than standard sewage plants. On the other hand, sewage plants capable of producing truly clean, safe effluent are many times more expensive and offer less safety.

"The PLTA supports the Committee findings fully. Our goal is to see them enacted as legislation."

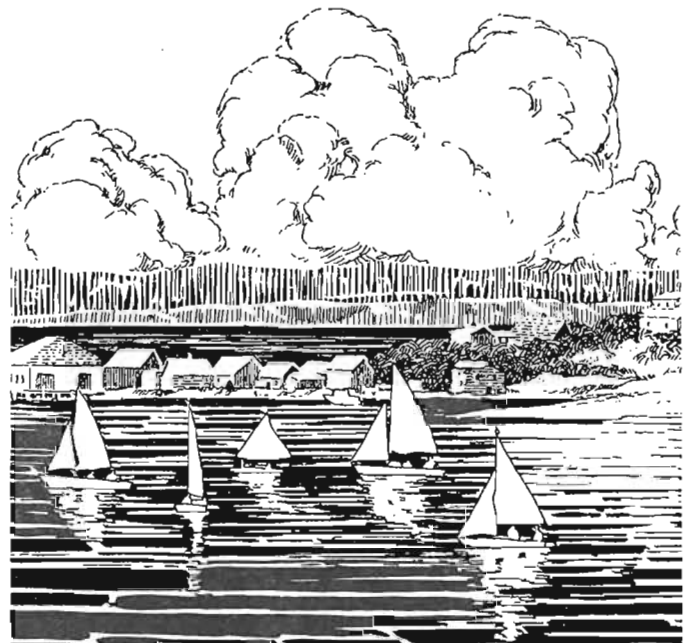
Enclosed is the new brochure of the PLTA. We would recommend that we try to double our membership by asking each member to get one more. The form makes it very simple. Let's all try!

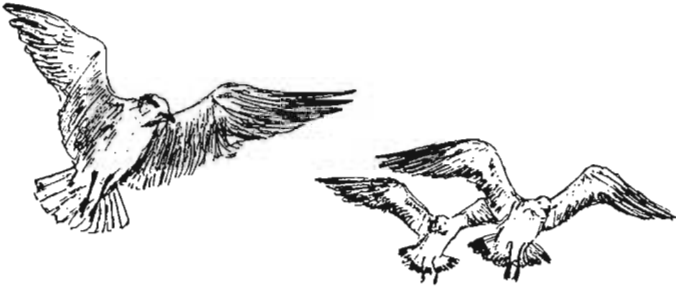
PLTA PETITIONS TEXAS WATER DEVELOPMENT BOARD

At the monthly meeting of the Texas Water Development Board on March 17, the Department of Water Resource's Executive Director presented our petition to outlaw sewage discharge permits on Lake Travis, Lake Austin and the nearby tributaries. We asked that our petition be amended to coincide with the corresponding Governor's Select Committee recommendations.

It was the first time that the Department publicly outlined our position and generally recommended in its favor. The Board itself did not appear to take our petition very seriously and made several objections dealing with the need to conserve sewage effluent for drinking in water-short areas of the state. Having emphasized that they were neither embracing the Department's recommendations nor committing themselves to take any positive action, they voted to let the Executive Director proceed with rule drafting and publication and to hold hearings on the proposed changes prior to their May board meeting.

We expect those rules to be drafted by early April and the hearings to be held in early or mid May.





CRITICAL NEED FOR ACCURATE DATA

To safely permit sewage discharge into the lakes, one must be able to model the results with sufficient accuracy to insure that the allocated nutrient loading poses no harm. Plants that cause degradation are hard to change or shut down once they are operating. As algae are already a problem, the benign level of discharge, if any, is presumably small. The model and the underlying data must therefore be fairly accurate and extensive to reduce the margin of error. There is no prospect of data of that accuracy and completeness being available within the next ten years.

Past data, some even before the construction of the dams, indicates that the water quality improved in the lakes after the closing of the dams and has slowly declined since that time with considerable variability from year to year and place to place.

Past test data are sporadic and not consistent with respect to time of year, location, weather patterns, or even substances measured. Thus, their usefulness as a model base is very limited.

Because of the high variability of conditions, an accurate model (if possible at all) would require over a decade of extensive and uniform measurements. Controls on pollution cannot wait for this, or those data will merely document the destruction of the lakes.

It is important that an extensive and uniform program of data collection be instituted and continued nonetheless to monitor these lakes and to enable future modelling and to identify current and new sources of pollution. Effort should be made to obtain series of data at water sources, open lake, developed and undeveloped coves and at the dam. In addition to consistent monthly measurements, effort should be made to obtain samples immediately after heavy rains and during times of rapid release at the dams. Tests should measure significant nutrients and humanspecific bacteria as well as the substances proposed in the L.C.R.A. program.

THE PROBLEM WILL GROW

Currently, the lakes are under little pollution stress. Much of the shoreline is undeveloped, and only one 6,000-gallon-per-day sewage plant puts effluent into the lakes. Most development to date has been low density with little impervious cover. Even so, pollution is becoming a problem, and the potential is growing.

Considering the high uses of the lakes we are trying to maintain, the lakes have little or no additional capacity to absorb pollution.

Many residents of both lakes draw their drinking water from them. Residential treatment systems are simple and limited, operated by untrained personnel and often non-existent. Thus, many residents can be expected to continue drinking untreated lake water. The number of residential water samples that fail their potability standards is already significant and on the increase. Lake Travis is unique in the state as a resource for scuba divers due to its size, high clarity, and proximity to the population. It is still only marginally clear enough for scuba use. The surface waters are sufficiently turbid with algae and other suspended solids that experienced divers prefer to dive to 100-foot depths where the water is clearer even though these depths are more dangerous, lighting is required, and a day's diving must be limited to only a couple of minutes (to avoid the bends) as opposed to a half hour at mid-depths or all day at a 20-foot maximum depth.

Boaters in both lakes must contend with problem algae growths on their boats under current nutrient loadings. The solution commonly adopted is an expensive lift to keep the boat out of water when not in use. Lake Austin currently supports such a rapid growth of macrophytes that the lake must be drained in winter to kill them back. Several swimming deaths have resulted from entanglement in these weeds.

Any additional nutrient loading will increase algae growth, exacerbate these problems and likely destroy these uses and our enjoyment of the lakes. Unless controlled, future pollution can be expected to be much worse than at present. Large high density residential developments are being planned around the lakes that will greatly change runoff quantities and qualities. Even current subdivisions are only partially completed with many more lots undeveloped than built upon. Sewage directly entering the lakes could increase 1,000-fold within ten years if current subdivisions and developments now in the planning stages are completed and served by standard sewage plants. Development is similarly continuing in the watersheds around the lakes altering scores of square miles of terrain and perhaps adding millions of gallons of treated sewage to the streams. As Austin grows and the economy improves, this growth will intensify.



POLLUTION PROBLEMS IN THE CENTRAL TEXAS LAKES

Pollution threats to the lakes are of four types:

1. **POINT SOURCES:** Primarily sewage discharge outfalls and direct leakage from faulty septic systems.

Most of our attention has been focused on these for they are serious problems which are readily identifiable (unless deeply submerged) and relatively simple to monitor and regulate. Efforts made to control point source pollution stand a good chance of success. Everything that we at the PLTA have learned this last year has confirmed our view that the less such direct pollution that enters our lakes, the better. Allowing discharge even after very expensive treatment still degrades the lakes unacceptably and subjects them to the very real risks of greater contamination when the sewage plant malfunctions. The stress from the three sources below will be large enough without allowing additional pollution that could be prevented.

2. **NON-POINT SOURCES:** Principally rain runoff from the surrounding land and possibly seepage from a contaminated underground aquifer.

Continued (See Pollution Problems.)

PLTA PRESIDENT WANTS YOU TO KNOW . . .

The Captain's Log will be published as needed for the benefit of those members who do not live in the immediate area, cannot attend meetings and who therefore have no source of information on the PLTA's concerns and activities. As we are as yet a volunteer staff, trying to keep expenses and extra labor to a minimum, these letters will probably not occur as frequently as they should to keep you abreast of events. This newsletter will also serve as a newspaper of record and a source of information.

Many of you from out of town are hearing from us for the first time since joining the PLTA. Welcome to the organization! You will find enclosed a bumper sticker which serves as your membership card. We get publicity wherever we can, and our members are one of our best sources.

Thanks to your efforts, your letters and your generous contributions, we have had a successful year. Baseline's permit application, the impetus that got PLTA started, has been successfully opposed. The issue of water quality in both Lake Travis and Lake Austin has become a topic of widespread public, political and media interest. The state is now reconsidering how it should protect its waters, and the Department of Water Resources is showing a greater interest in the environmental consequences of its regulations (at least with respect to our two lakes). We have this year a real chance of making permanent changes in the Water Quality regulations. In the future, we hope this action will save us from being

pitted against every developer with a new subdivision who is trying to do what the regulations require. They deserve to know in advance what is expected of them, and we deserve to be assured that that development will not result in the degradation of our waters. We will need the continuing help of all of you to get the best rules and legislation possible. Your letters and contacts can turn the trick.

Water legislation will form a major part of this legislative session where perhaps 2,000 different bills will be considered, including our own House Bill 1335. If we want legislation outlawing sewage discharge into Lakes Travis and Austin or all the Highland Lakes to be included in this, we will have to make a considerable effort to publicize our cause among the Legislators. They cannot be expected to be familiar with the contents and purposes of 2,000 bills, so it falls on us to make them aware of the need to protect our lakes. Those of you who live in Texas outside of Travis County can be particularly helpful here by pleading our case with your own Senator and Representative and with legislators with whom you are personally acquainted. Such contacts can be extremely effective. All of us can contact Lieutenant Governor William Hobby of Houston, House Speaker Gib Lewis of Fort Worth, and the members of the Senate Natural Resources Committee and the House Environmental Affairs Committee. These people will be directly considering all water protection proposals and will be receptive to you and your concerns. Letters to Governor Mark White and TDWR Executive Secretary Charles Nemir would also be helpful. When writing them be certain of your facts and clear in your requests. This respects their time. Remember that these people are in office because they want to serve you. Threatening letters serve no purpose and will only be counterproductive. They will want to know what you want them to do for you, so make your communication in the form of a request and state clearly what you want. Now with your renewed effort we may be able to change the laws so that we won't have to keep coming back to you for another contribution for more legal fees to fight another application.

Pollution Problems Continued

The National Urban Runoff (NURP) study of Lake Austin recently completed identified rain runoff as a major source of pollutants in the lake and even more significant than the point sources. Nutrients (phosphates and nitrates), mud, oxygen-robbing decaying matter and fecal contamination are carried down the steep slopes in large quantities during a heavy rain. Lake Travis has similar topography and as development continues will have similar loadings. Scarification of the land (cutting and filling) and impervious cover (patios, foundations, roads and driveways) reduce absorption of the rain by the land, increase runoff and increase the load of loose soil and chemicals carried by that runoff.

3. **UPSTREAM SOURCES:** The Colorado and Pedernales Rivers flow through many counties and through municipalities, agricultural regions, and even oil production areas where pollutants are added to the streams. Some of these contaminants are carried into Lakes Travis and Austin. This source cannot be controlled by authority strictly within Travis County. It needs to be monitored and perhaps controlled nonetheless.

4. **BOATS, HOUSEBOATS AND THE PUBLIC:** There is a lack of trash receptacles and restroom facilities at many points around the lakes used heavily by swimmers and boaters. The prevailing opinion around both lakes is that houseboats are not adequately controlled and that many use the lakes for a dump station. To protect the lake from trash and fecal contamination, stricter enforcement must be combined with greater availability of nonpolluting alternatives for the recreational public.



INTERESTING FACT

Municipalities cannot get federal funding for sewage plants producing effluent cleaner than about 30 BOD/30 TSS, a level totally unacceptable and currently illegal for effluent discharged into a drinking water source. On the other hand, the extra cost of irrigation and evapotranspiration systems would be eligible for federal funding. Thus, a "no discharge" rule would not only be safer and more effective than a "clean discharge" rule, but complying municipal plants could be built with less local money and less red tape.

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