

Opinions

Future of Granite Shoals in the sewer

For better or worse, the mid-term elections are now officially behind us, so I can't think of a more appropriate topic to discuss here than sewage treatment. First of all, our political psyches can all use a good scrubbing, but most importantly, sewage treatment is a critical issue that actually makes a difference in our real-world lives, especially for anyone living in Granite Shoals, a community of 5,000 residents on Lake LBJ which has been without a sewage-treatment plant for all of its 48-year existence.



Jackie English

It is beginning to look like that long sewage-treatment drought may finally be coming to an end, according to a newsletter posted by Granite Shoals Mayor Frank Reilly on his Pro Texana blog this week.

For several years now, Reilly has been leading the City Council, city staff members and planners, citizen groups and industry experts in a full-court press to drag Granite Shoals into the 20th century (better late than never) through the construction of a sewage treatment system. According to Reilly's blog (read full text at <http://frankreilly.com/2010/10/21/a-sewer-system-for-granite-shoals/>), the first stage of the new sewage-treatment system could be operational by 2014, with construction of the third and final phase in 2018.

However, not all Granite Shoals residents have welcomed this project. Some fear the system could send tax rates spiraling out of control, while others question the three-stage construction process that seems to favor businesses over homeowners. (Under the present plan, many homeowners will not receive service until the third stage is complete.)

And then there are those – many of them long-time residents – who prefer to leave things just the way they are. (After all, there is nothing more invigorating on a crisp fall morning than catching a whiff of your neighbor's backed-up septic tank while you enjoy that first cup of coffee on the patio.) The rumblings coming from these combined constituencies have created friction and imbued the plan with controversy it truly doesn't deserve.

Such is the nature of progress – and usually the lack thereof – in Granite Shoals.

From its very inception, the identity and reputation of Granite Shoals has been defined by minimal standards and lowered expectations. When the development (known as Sherwood Shores) was launched in 1962, it was at that time the largest single-platted subdivision in the state of Texas. It was promoted far and wide as a fantastic opportunity to own property in a lakeside community.

The lots were not only cheap, they were puny – with a single lot barely able to accommodate a single-wide mobile home. Still, they sold like hotcakes, often to people who intended to hold them as investments and then flip them for a tidy profit.

Much to their chagrin, they soon discovered the market flooded with these tiny lots, the overwhelming majority of which were not on the lake, so that years later the lots had barely appreciated at all.

The landscape of Granite Shoals became pockmarked by for-sale signs. Many owners abandoned their lots, which were eventually sold for the price of the taxes owed.

But this isn't the whole story of how Granite Shoals became, well, Granite Shoals. The bigger problem was the developer made essentially no commitment to infrastructure. Not only was there no sewage treatment plant, there was no water-treatment plant (there is one now, well run and a major source of income to support other city services). For the most part, there were not even any decent roads. Red granite gravel streets – many of them washed out or full of potholes – were the norm for years. (Eventually, with a lot of help from the county, major thoroughfares were paved and, in recent years, the city has been pursuing an aggressive course of action to improve the standards of all roads.)

However, there is one advantage to living in a community with no good roads, no centralized-water system and no sewage-treatment system; it is really cheap to live there. Property taxes for everyone not living on the water were very low, which made Granite Shoals a very attractive place for middle-income retirees, as well as providing a boon for landlords who quickly built up a nice inventory of used single-wides which could be rented to low-income workers for a very tidy profit. Add to this a history of lax or non-existence zoning standards, and the ultimate outcome was a community with a drastic variety of living standards.

Lovely – and in some cases opulent – homes hug the lakeshore, while only blocks away large families may be living in rickety mobile homes that just barely meet occupancy-code standards.

In spite of this, Granite Shoals has a lot to recommend it. There is a vibrant community of caring, civic-minded people who take pride in their homes and are working hard to improve the city by implementing beautification projects, developing a comprehensive master plan, updating zoning standards, improving the city's vast network of mostly lakeside parks and supporting

infrastructure improvements like the long-awaited sewage treatment plant.

The future of Granite Shoals looks brighter than it has in a long time.

So, why should a sewage-treatment plant make this much difference? Look at it this way.

When is the last time you came across a city of 5,000 people that had no grocery store, no medical facilities, very few standard shops, businesses or restaurants and only one elementary school? Put another way, compare the development status of Granite Shoals with Llano, where the population is smaller but the economic and development standards are much higher. There is no comparison. What determines the difference?

Of course, Llano as a community has a longer, richer history as a city and had the advantage of developing along traditional lines over time, rather than springing up overnight with almost no commitment to accepted norms of community planning. Still, the answer goes beyond that.

Llano has a solid tax base with diverse streams of revenue from both property taxes and sales taxes that Granite Shoals can't come close to matching. And why is that? In order to support grocery stores, hospitals, schools, businesses, light industry, tourism and resort development, robust multifamily construction, and anything else that truly makes a city a city, you must have a centralized sewage-treatment system.

Even if septic systems weren't such a horrible choice for sewage disposal for a community built on top of a solid granite dome sitting next to a lake (which it is), the cost of installing septic systems that could support larger enterprises would be prohibitive. Business and economic development will simply never happen in Granite Shoals without the presence of a sewage-treatment system. To borrow a phrase from "Field of Dreams," if you build it, they will come.

Granite Shoals is a diamond in the rough just needing a little polishing to shine. The sewage-treatment plant will not only bring a much-needed service to the community, it will be the catalyst to kick-start an engine of growth that can elevate the status and viability of this community in a way that can compete with any city in the area.

Also, Reilly and Granite Shoals city leaders have developed a reasonable, manageable plan that will get this system built with minimal impact on the current tax burden (actually, with no added tax burden to those over 65).

It is time for all Granite Shoals residents to get behind this. The potential benefits for you, your friends, your neighbors and the whole community far outweigh any niggling final concerns that might further delay the project.

After 48 years of settling for just getting by, it is time to embrace the future and get the job done.

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