

Demand for services may strain county

Officials must prepare as population beyond cities continues to grow.

By John W. Gonzalez

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Updated 12:38 a.m., Monday, May 16, 2011

It's as if the entire population of Corpus Christi moved here.

In Bexar County, the population swelled by 320,000 in the past decade. Providing government services to the now 1.7 million residents has become a costly proposition — especially with one-third of new arrivals landing in unincorporated areas that rely heavily on the county.

Farms and ranches still can be found on the county's fringes, but prime land tracts outside any city limits have been filling, leaving seas of rooftops where deer or cattle once grazed.

Last month, planners told county commissioners the population growth will further strain finances, and they're projecting that over the next five years it'll cost \$20 million merely to sustain current levels of service in public safety, road maintenance, elections and other key areas.

Extending a full array of city-type services to county residents would add \$155 million to the 2012 budget, planners estimated. That's not going to happen, officials conceded, but the county still must reckon with rising demand for help with solid waste, noise and odor abatement, development services and other functions.

In 2000, 10 percent of the county's population lived in unincorporated areas, said [Tina Smith-Dean](#) of the county's Planning and [Resource Management Department](#). "Now it's close to 15 percent," she said, and by 2017, it's expected to be 18 percent.

With many of these suburban residents yearning for urban amenities, commissioners hope to manage their expectations.

"No city taxes — that's real good, but there's no city services either," Precinct 2 Commissioner [Paul Elizondo](#) said.

"We are their first line of municipal government," county budget director [David Smith](#) said. He said delivery of services via automation — e-government — must increase. The county recently launched a "community dashboard" on its website to ease access to information and services.

Much of the county's growth is the result of San Antonio's decision to curtail annexation eight years ago.

"San Antonio is in no hurry to annex," Mayor [Julián Castro](#) said. "It's not off the table," he said, but the city's priority is handling existing needs.

Castro said "a tremendous number" of residents living outside San Antonio rely on its assets, and he sees pros and cons to living in unincorporated areas.

"The advantage is clear — it's cheaper. The disadvantage is, don't expect the infrastructure — the green space, the library — to be in your backyard," Castro said.

Lanny Worel, who has enjoyed living in the Ventura Heights subdivision in East Bexar County for almost 25 years, doesn't pay city taxes, and aside from occasionally using a San Antonio dog park, he doesn't rely on city services. But Worel, who's mostly satisfied with the services he gets, said there have been long-term issues with road maintenance and code enforcement — and public safety concerns.

"The city has a much more efficient code compliance system, and people can get unsightly items taken care of in a timelier manner," Worel said.

"In the city, you have the fire department closer to the homes, so their fire insurance is lower; in the county, it takes a little longer for the fire department to reach you."

County Judge [Nelson Wolff](#) has suggested that some densely packed areas consider incorporating — or seek to be annexed by one of the suburban cities — to secure city-type services. But incorporation can be daunting. In the past 25 years, only three suburbs have become cities: Von Ormy in 2006, Bulverde in 2001 and Fair Oaks Ranch in 1988.

"For them (subdivisions) to do a city may be a huge undertaking and a big struggle," Precinct 4 Commissioner [Tommy Adkisson](#) said.

In his East Bexar precinct, the county faces several urban issues in unincorporated areas. Just last month, the county partnered with Schertz to help 25 Hillbrook homeowners whose water well ran dry in 2009.

"But that's unusual," Adkisson said. "The typical issue is code compliance and stray animals."

Garbage pickup isn't required in the outlying areas, though most subdivisions contract for trash pickup. Still, Adkisson said many residents have no garbage collection, which raises concern that some wastes are not disposed of properly.

Adkisson backs proposed legislation to make trash pickup mandatory. Commissioners, who lack home-rule powers granted to cities, also have endorsed a measure to accelerate sanctions for derelict property owners. The Texas Constitution gives counties little authority to regulate land



use; pending legislation would expand those powers.

Many communities have formed emergency services districts to ensure EMS and fire protection, but some of those districts are struggling financially.

"The bottom line is there's not even enough revenue in fire districts to pay for a firetruck," Wolff said.

Still, formation of ESDs put many residents at ease and saved them on home insurance, averting campaigns for annexation or incorporation.

"That was the beauty of the emergency service district. It was a rifle shot at providing a service to those that need it," Adkisson said.

Elizondo said development outside Loop 1604 between U.S. 90 and FM 471 is being closely watched. In lieu of any more cities being formed or special districts created, residents will be turning to the county when issues arise, the West Side commissioner said.

"When people find out the streets are going to hell ... I don't want the Commissioners Court being put in the position of saying, 'That's not our job.' That doesn't work. They're going to be up in arms," Elizondo said.

That's why planning is crucial, he said.

"We've got to start now. Otherwise, when you get somebody thinking they're being cheated by this government, that's too late," Elizondo said.

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