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Background

The Texas Section AWWA, the largest single-state Section of AWWA’s 43 Sections, has a well-known reputation of independence. By many, it is still considered a Republic that won its independence from Mexico and later chose to join the United States of America. Texas is also known for many other things such as barbecue, Shiner Bock Beer, cattle, and a special dance called the Texas Two Step.

Texans like to be known for their ability to “git-er-done” no matter the magnitude, breadth or depth of the challenges they face. Texas currently enjoys the many advantages of being among the fastest-growing Sun Belt states of the Southwestern United States. With a very diverse populace and culture, Texas’s economy is booming. Like any other state, Texas also has tremendous challenges. It has public and private utilities that are economically disadvantaged serving communities that are unable to properly finance and maintain their rural utilities and supporting infrastructure.

Community Engineering Corps in Texas

In September 2014, the Texas Section AWWA began the process of communicating the importance of being part of the Community Engineering Corps—a joint venture between the American Society of Civil Engineers, Engineers Without Borders, and the American Water Works Association.

The Genesis of This Texas Two-Step Success

This story began with an August 30, 2017, afternoon phone call from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the Texas water, wastewater, stormwater, air, and environmental regulatory agency charged with preserving and protecting the environment and public, regarding the many sources of potential contaminants that can contribute to degraded quality of life, short- and long-term health-related issues, and/or improper oversight of public and private water utilities.

The author of this story was contacted to find out if the Texas Section AWWA could assist a small, rural, privately-owned water utility, West Oaks Phoenix, with the submission of a Texas Water Development Board Application for Safe Drinking Water Act State Revolving Fund (SDWASRF) loan to help improve the system and to bring it back into compliance. The reason for the “Texas Two Step” play on words is that the first step was the contact on August 30, 2017, with the second and final step coming two weeks later, on September 14, 2017. But in every tragic circumstance (e.g., the devastating events of Hurricane Harvey in Texas), the Texas Water Development Board extended the application deadline to October 4, 2017 (35 days) after the initial contact.

Now, this may not sound like a big deal, but anyone who has ever applied for a SDWASRF loan knows it is as big as a west Texas sky on a clear night. The good news was the utility known as West Oaks Phoenix had previously been ranked high on the priority list for funding due to its disadvantaged condition. At this point, we knew if the loan was approved, it would likely be eligible for full loan forgiveness.

The Utility: West Oaks Phoenix

West Oaks Phoenix is a small utility located in Hunt County, Texas, just northeast of Dallas County in far North Central Texas. It is a groundwater supply with one water well (not
in good condition), a nonfunctional ground storage tank, a dysfunctional pressure tank, and booster pumps that are not properly sized to provide required firm capacity. In addition, the system did not have a consistent billing system or a preventive maintenance system. It served a total household population of 27, and approximately 50 percent of those served were economically disadvantaged.

From an operational and water-quality perspective, the system had its share of difficulties, including:

1. Water contaminants exceeding primary and secondary maximum contaminant levels,
2. Frequent documented outages and service interruptions from water line breaks and leaks,
3. Production capacity that was less than 85% of the minimum required by the TCEQ,
4. An out-of-service ground storage tank,
5. A pressure tank that was no longer functional, and
6. Periodic loss of disinfectant residuals in the distribution system.

The icing on the cake was that the system had been in bankruptcy for years and was currently under the supervision of a TCEQ-appointed temporary manager to help bring the system back into compliance.

At the time of the contact by the TCEQ with a plea for assistance from the Community Engineering Corps, the West Oaks Phoenix system was being reorganized under new leadership and had filed new articles of incorporation with the Texas Secretary of State and had been granted the status of a new water supply corporation, Lil Countryside Water Supply Corporation (WSC). Fortunately, the newly organized WSC had a serious new board of directors headed by President Tracey Lerich. They took their new charge seriously and provided superb assistance to our Community Engineering Corps team.

The final application with all required attachments, including many official documents that required multiagency signoff, was more than 400 pages of operational, water accountability, and water loss issues; system billing records; and a plethora of financial information.

On March 21, 2018, the Texas Water Development Board granted $250,000 to the Lil Countryside Water Supply Corporation (Hunt County, Texas) for system improvements, and as of the writing of this article, the Lil Countryside WSC has retained a professional engineering firm to assist with the final design, bidding of the improvements, and startup. According to President Lerich, they are waiting for some regulatory clearances before they begin making the much-needed improvements to the system.