



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS

1212 Guadalupe St., Suite 107 • Austin, TX 78701-1800
(512) 472-1100 • Fax (512) 472-4114 • lwvtexas@lwvtexas.org

COUNTY AUTHORITY

Rapidly Growing Counties Need the Tools to Manage Growth

Texas counties have very little authority to manage the explosive growth many of them are experiencing. They cannot regulate a building's purpose (i.e. residential, commercial, industrial, or agricultural), or the size, number, or density of buildings on a tract of land. The adequacy of roads and water to serve a development cannot be taken into account.

The League of Women Voters believes that the inability of Texas' most rapidly growing counties to do basic land-use planning is detrimental to the environment, especially water quality and availability. Traffic congestion, air quality, school crowding, and basic services such as police and fire protection are also negatively impacted when counties are forced to react to growth rather than plan for it.

The League of Women Voters supports granting counties some specific tools to facilitate intelligent management of the currently unchecked urban sprawl being experienced in formerly rural counties. Basic planning authority would have to be approved by the residents of the county and would include the ability to:

- *Establish designated areas*, known as macro-zones, for industrial, commercial, agricultural, and residential use with buffer areas between zones.
- *Set density limits* which would protect our increasingly threatened water supply, guard against flooding, and reduce traffic congestion.
- *Assess impact fees*, paid by developers, to offset the increased cost of building infrastructure and providing services.

Common sense land-use tools such as these, which are available to our cities, are not being requested by most Texas counties. However, in rapidly growing, formerly rural counties, the need is dire; uncontrolled sprawl makes these areas less livable and threatens fragile areas of the state. In such areas, residents' quality of life suffers when county government is unable to prevent the introduction of a manufacturing plant or a rock quarry immediately adjacent to an existing neighborhood. The cost of providing adequate roads and services to large new subdivisions scrambles county finances when the flexibility to handle growth proactively is denied. Existing residents end up subsidizing new developments unless impact fees can be assessed.

Texas has a history of protecting property rights which must be respected. The right of an individual homeowner to be protected from incompatible development on neighboring land is also important. Land values suffer when wells go dry and roads are congested. As aquifer levels fall dangerously low, farmers and ranchers have joined in the call to restrict the rampant growth that depletes this non-renewable resource.

Growth management authority is a fact of life for much of the country. Responsible builders and developers recognize that creating neighborhoods where the infrastructure is planned to meet the needs of the residents makes an area more attractive. For example, the majority of the Hill Country is located in unincorporated areas. It is important that residents there, and in all counties of Texas, have a voice in determining the future of their environment and way of life.

The counties requesting land-use authority are not asking for zoning ordinance authority equal to that of cities. They are requesting the ability to allow for planned development that can be sustained with available aquifer reserves and supported by county infrastructure and services.

The League of Women Voters urges the Texas Legislature to grant counties the authority to manage growth in a sensible manner. Urban sprawl and depleted natural resources benefit no one in the long run.

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1212 Guadalupe # 107 *Austin, Texas 78701

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www.lwvtexas.org

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