

Central Texas Leaders Tackle Water and Energy Challenges at Kyle Summit

Over 260 community members, business leaders, and public officials gathered at Stone Hall at Texas Old Town in Kyle on February 13, 2025, for the Energy & Water Infrastructure Summit hosted by the **San Marcos Chamber of Commerce** and **Hays Caldwell Economic Development Partnership**. The Watershed Association and twenty other community organizations were sponsors of the luncheon dedicated to addressing the critical water and energy infrastructure challenges facing our rapidly growing region. This gathering, moderated by former **Hays County Commissioner and CAMPO Chairman Will Conley**, brought together the region's foremost water and energy experts.

Phil Wilson, CEO of the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), delivered a sobering keynote highlighting the unprecedented growth in Central Texas. While our region thrives economically, Wilson presented striking statistics: **Hays County alone grew 53.4% between 2010-2020, with statewide growth continuing at nearly twice the national rate.**

"We're the epicenter of a transformation of growth patterns not just in our state or country, but perhaps in the world," **Wilson noted**. This growth, combined with the surging demands of the technology sector, is creating unprecedented infrastructure pressures.

The most urgent challenge is power demand, which is expected to nearly double to 150,000 megawatts by 2030, driven largely by data centers and AI facilities. To address this, the LCRA is investing over \$784 million this year in transmission infrastructure and adding 150 megawatts of battery storage. Wilson highlighted LCRA's Turnback Power Plant, currently under construction in Comal County, which will feature two natural gas units. He also noted that a single data center consumes as much energy as 100,000 homes, underscoring the massive energy demands of technology infrastructure.

However, water infrastructure emerged as the summit's most critical focus. As Wilson emphasized, "Low-hanging fruit water supply options have already been developed," making new projects increasingly complex and expensive.

In his role as moderator, Will Conley framed the discussion around practical concerns for everyday residents. Drawing from his experience as a county official, Conley emphasized the importance of translating complex water policy into terms the public can understand. *"When I was elected in 2005, I had what I call a 'courthouse center,'"* **Conley shared**. *"But when I went out for re-election, I quickly realized I was really talking to myself and other professionals."*

Conley prompted panelists to address quality-of-life concerns from residents, noting: *"I have a lot of friends that say, 'I have a good job, but I can't launch my boat anymore. The lake is getting*

low, and I can't float the river. My water bills keep going up.' From some perspectives, quality of life has actually been going down."

The expert panel – featuring Wilson alongside **Robert Puente** (San Antonio Water System), **Darrell Nichols** (Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority), and **Graham Moore** (Alliance Regional Water Authority) – stressed several key points regarding our water future:

1. **Planning horizons must extend 35+ years**, with immediate action needed for projects that take 10-15 years to complete.
2. **Regional collaboration is essential**, as individual communities can no longer secure adequate water supplies independently.
3. **Conservation must be prioritized alongside new supply development.** As San Antonio Water System's Robert Puente noted, conservation has allowed San Antonio to maintain stable water usage despite decades of growth.

Puente highlighted San Antonio Water System's impressive diversification strategy, which includes developing water from 13 different projects and 9 distinct sources. **Key innovations include an Aquifer Storage and Recovery facility capable of storing a full year's water supply, a desalination plant, and the nation's largest recycled water system.** He emphasized that these successes followed earlier failed attempts at regional collaboration, ultimately pushing SAWS to develop more self-reliant solutions

Conley drew important parallels between water development and transportation planning, noting: *"There hasn't been a significant project in transportation done without regional entities involved, regional funding sources involved...it is essential that all of us work together in order to provide that resource that we all fundamentally need."*

Darrell Nichols from the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA) emphasized the importance of science-based approaches to water management rather than solutions bounded by political jurisdictions. He discussed GBRA's ongoing projects to develop new water sources and their collaboration with other regional authorities.

Graham Moore highlighted the remarkable progress of the **Alliance Regional Water Authority**, which was created in 2007 and has grown into a significant regional player. Moore discussed their Project Water Secure initiative, expected to launch within the next 12-18 months, describing it as *"the next cheapest water after conservation."* Alliance Water is a Regional Water Authority that was formed to resolve the long-term water supply, comprised of the cities of Kyle, San Marcos, and Buda, along with the Canyon Regional Water Authority which represents County Line Special Utility District (SUD), Crystal Clear SUD, Martindale WSC, and Green Valley SUD.

Toward the end of the panel, Conley pushed speakers on the sustainability of Texas's economic future, asking whether our infrastructure planning was keeping pace with growth. The panelists agreed that while challenges exist, they remained cautiously optimistic provided immediate action is taken.

The summit advocated for Senate Bill 7 which would allocate a new multibillion-dollar annual state funding source for water infrastructure, recognizing that without significant investment now, future economic growth could be constrained.

Environmental concerns featured prominently in discussions, with panelists noting that 60-70% of summer water use goes to landscape irrigation. The speakers emphasized the need for drought-resistant landscaping requirements, soil management improvements for water retention, and increased investment to protect existing water resources.

"If we don't plan and start making investments today, we really will cross the crisis threshold," **Wilson warned.** *"You can't wave a magic wand tomorrow and say 'I wish I had 500,000 acre-feet of water supply.'"*

Despite the challenges, the panel expressed **cautious optimism** about Central Texas' water future, provided that regional collaboration continues and adequate investments are made. As one panelist reflected, *"In my many years of experience, I have never seen a community say 10 or 20 years later that they got too much water or wished they hadn't invested."*

The summit concluded with Conley summarizing the sense of both optimism and urgency: *"We are blessed to live in such a wonderful place with high standards and quality of life, prosperity, economic growth, and environmental protection...but there's a sense of urgency, and our leadership is listening. It's up to all of us to run in the same direction to ensure that our future remains bright."*

The energy and engagement from attendees underscored the importance of these issues to the community. The City of Wimberley, Woodcreek, Hays County, Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, and the Watershed Association, all partners in the **Watershed Protection Plan Interlocal Agreement** were all represented at the event. Many participants noted that the opportunity to hear directly from the region's key infrastructure decision-makers provided valuable insights into how Central Texas is preparing for its water and energy future.