

“What is the city going to do about the dams?”

I get that question a lot these days – mainly from those who live on the river – other folks, not so much.

The Guadalupe River and the City of Seguin are inexorably tied together by history, tradition and culture. If it were not for the river and its tributary, Walnut Branch, the city would not even exist.

Here’s something of which many people are not aware. The City of Seguin owns a dam on the river. It’s the Saffold Dam at Starcke Park. You probably know it as the dam connected to the Power Plant Restaurant. It is a static dam, with no gates, and requires no maintenance. It’s been there in some form for over a hundred and twenty years. The city acquired it long before most of the current regulatory agencies were even thought of.

The river immediately upstream of Saffold Dam will remain as it always has, depending on the flow of the river, regardless of what may happen to the GBRA dams. As long as there is a flow over the dam, the river immediately downstream will not be affected severely. River Drive along the golf course will retain its iconic beauty.

The full extent of Starcke Park, including the pecan grove in Starcke Park East on the east side of Austin Street will change very little, as long as water is flowing over Saffold Dam.

Here’s a worst-case scenario: If Nolte Dam (Meadow Lake) fails, and if we have a drought, and water ceases to flow over Saffold Dam, the river becomes a trickle through Starcke Park East, and farther downstream at Meadow Lake.

We need to pay attention to our river – it’s the most precious physical asset we possess. It represents the cultural lifeblood that runs through our community. It provides recreation, beauty and economic vitality to our city. Virtually every piece of promotional material about Seguin mentions the Guadalupe River and its beauty.

On the other hand, it can also be a horrifying, destructive force to anything in its path - especially to those who live directly along its banks. There is an implied risk in living near the river. It’s a risk that most people who live there have accepted. It’s amazing that so many people who still live on the river have experienced repeated floods, but have been able to rebuild their homes and continue their lifestyle, regardless of the risk.

What they didn’t count on was the risk of the lakes’ disappearing. I and most folks around here were under the false implication that GBRA was maintaining the dams, and that the lakes would remain as they were in perpetuity. Maybe I haven’t been paying attention for the past 20 or 30 years. I could be wrong, but it seems like GBRA’s refusal of their responsibility only began to emerge in the past 8 years or so. As far as I can remember, the imminent failure of the dams, and GBRA’s abdication of responsibility was never really brought to the public’s attention until the Lake Wood dam failure.

So... what can we do?

Some people have suggested that we annex, purchase, repair and operate Nolte Dam.

That is simply not going to happen.

In reality, as a governing municipality, there is very little we can do by law. Besides, we have enough problems generating revenue for fixing our streets, repairing our ancient and deteriorating infrastructure, supporting our fire and police departments, investing in future growth, and trying to create jobs. Cities are not in the river management business – we don’t have the knowledge, the skills, or the money. Most importantly, we don’t have the legal authority.

The Guadalupe River eventually ends as an estuary, and then empties into the Gulf of Mexico, and therefore is connected to all the oceans of the world. In our crazy world, where every body of water seems to fall under some sort of State, Federal or UN regulation, we cannot involve ourselves in the horrific bureaucratic mess that would include the TCEQ, EPA, FEMA, USGS, NOAA, USDA, NRCS, USDI, USF&W, TP&W, NMFS, USACE, USBLM, USGS, and the USFS. Not to mention the Sierra Club, Save the Whales and the Endangered Species Act!

All we can do is encourage, advocate, protest, lobby, use the “bully pulpit” and the voting booth as best we can. I wish I had better news, but I don’t.

Gosh, I love our river, and I love this town!