

# **Minutes of the ECROA Board of Directors Meeting**

## **February 25, 2020**

- 1. Call to Order. Establish Quorum and welcome guest speakers:** Meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m. at the Wilson County ESD #2 Emergency Services Building, 11381 FM 775, Floresville, TX 78114. Board members present were Aaron Hartzler, President; Sam Jones, Vice President; Heather Vela, Treasurer, Susan DeLoren, Secretary and Jerry Carpenter. A quorum was declared.
  
- 2. Approval of November and January meeting minutes.** One change was made to each of the minutes, and they were approved as corrected.
  
- 3. Welcoming Committee Report.** No report.
- 4. Treasurer's Report.** No report.
  
- 5. ACC Report and Parks Committee Report.** Reports were postponed.
  - a. Aqua America water outage issues/solutions.** Representatives of Aqua America were introduced. They are: Bob Laughman, President; Brian Robinson, Supervisor for Central Texas; Brendt Brady, Regional Mgr. for Austin/San Antonio area, and David Spivey, Operator for Eagle Creek.

Bob Laughman spoke for Aqua Texas and thanked three area residents for their help during the event: David Pratt for helping coordinate the activities between Aqua Texas and area residents; Tracy Ellington who used his truck to get the generator needed to address the electrical outage at the pumping station, and Chris Maron, electrician, who hooked up the generator. Bob then stated that his group was here to listen, and suggested that the residents who were present describe how they were affected by the event.

Amy Pratt, resident of Eagle Creek Ranch, began by calling on Bob Laughman for a description of the chain of events surrounding the crisis and whether any of them could have been handled differently.

Bob called on Brian Robinson for an explanation of the chain of events. Brian stated that the weather was a contributing factor to the crisis, but not the reason for the event. The event began before the weather turned nasty and dangerous. There was an underground 10" pipe that broke at a 90 degree elbow on Saturday morning at the Windmill station, and a repair team was dispatched to that break. That break slowly drained the storage tanks both on Windmill Drive and Eagle Creek Drive. The break was caused by the use of inappropriate methods used when the system was built, and when the team realized the severity of the problem they immediately got on the phone to procure the needed parts for repair. The team found the parts were not readily available, but since that line

did not directly serve any customers, no customers lost water entirely although there was a loss of water pressure. A decision was made to source the parts and return on Monday to repair the problem.

Early Sunday morning the winter weather storm hit. By accessing that broken joint, the team has basically taken the Windmill location off-line, and it couldn't pump into the system any more. A resident then stated that he had known about the winter weather's coming on Friday, and Brian replied that they had known the winter weather was approaching, but the system had been weatherized, and the weather would not have precluded the team from repairing the break. What happened then was the beginning of the meltdown of the entire system, not just here but throughout the entire state. That's when the winter weather did have an impact. The weather that was expected and the weather that happened were two different things.

At that point the Cherry Ridge location was still operational, still refilling the system. Saturday night as that location had reported no problems, no outages. However the electric lines to the Cherry Ridge station were damaged by the winter storm that hit early Sunday morning, and at that time total power failure occurred at that location. Bob then spoke up and admitted that they should have worked to complete the necessary repair of the Windmill pipe on Saturday, as the needed parts were available in Austin and other locations in Texas, but Aqua was not prepared for the weather that actually hit early Sunday morning. However, even if those repairs had been completed it would not have averted the crisis.

Aaron then asked if the break could have been predicted and prevented. Brian replied that the joint was not leaking, was not giving any indication that anything was wrong or the break was imminent. Aaron then asked that when the Windmill location was taken off-line and the power had failed at the Cherry Ridge location why weren't the residents notified of the problems and reasons for the loss of water. Aaron said at that point the lack of communication had presented the most outrage among the residents, who were given multiple reasons for the water outage from the company's customer service reps on the phone. The reasons were all false. Some residents were told they must have a break somewhere in their own pipes, and some were actually hung up on when they called.

Brian explained that when the Cherry Ridge station lost power, that stopped all the processes associated with keeping the location from freezing – the heaters, the water running through the system, etc. A resident then asked whether the company should have had a generator on-site for just such an emergency. Bob answered that the company had generators at many locations in Texas, but the company's usual emergency preparations for use of generators were for hurricanes, and backup power to locations such as the one on Cherry Ridge should have been supplied by the power company. This obviously did not happen, partly because of the winter storm. At least 50% of the company's generators in this part of the state were inoperable because of the weather.

The diesel fuel in the generators turns to jelly in extreme cold, and the generators simply shut down.

Sam interrupted to state what we really wanted to know was what the company was going to do to keep this series of events from happening again in the event we have another winter weather event like this past one. Bob answered there were about three things that needed to be addressed, one of which was communication. A resident asked whether the existing water storage facilities were sufficient or whether we need another storage facility. Another resident wondered whether the water company had anticipated the population growth in this area; are the two current locations enough to handle the growth? Brian replied that the company is currently in the process of going over plans and consulting with engineers about future water needs.

Brian continued, the company is looking at whether a new water source is needed. The problem with obtaining a new water source is that it requires property, and to purchase property for a new well for Eagle Creek Ranch means the company will have to go outside the area to acquire the property because of the lack of property inside the area. That will require the installation of long transmission lines to get the water back to the subdivision. That presents its own set of problems, but the company is looking into that.

A resident asked, if the company is considering these different ways of addressing the problem, which are going to entail the company's spending money, how the company was going to recoup that money – is this something the company had already budgeted for or would the residents see an increase in their water bills?

Sam answered that last year there was a rate increase, for infrastructure. Aqua Texas denied that there had been any increase for infrastructure or planning, but agreed there was a rate increase to cover an increase in the cost of water. Bob assured everyone that residents had not had a rate increase in ten years, in fact at one point the Trump tax bill saved the company about 5%, and they passed that saving on to their customers. Bob continued that a regulated utility in the state makes its money by spending its capital. That is, it receives a return on its capital. That's what the regulators do, is review spending on capital improvements to make sure expenditures are reasonable and justifiable. That's what the PUC [Public Utilities Commission] does. Bob assured everyone that rates were not going to rise for at least a year -that the company would be spending money on improvements, but nothing is on the horizon that would cause a rate increase and one had not been requested.

Brian then brought the discussion back to the outage event timeline. By that Sunday evening both locations, on Windmill and Eagle Creek Drive, had lost power, resulting in the freezing up of all mechanics at both locations. This included the movement of water, which froze in the pipes and caused ruptures in the pipes at both facilities.

The area manager's traveling down here at that time to find out what was going on was impossible, so he could not report to customer service and customer service was therefore unable to answer residents' questions when they called. Aqua Texas was unable to get eyes on the problems at the locations until Monday evening. Bob reiterated that the company's main emergency planning currently centers around hurricane preparedness, which events happen much more frequently than severe winter storms. A better system for deployment of personnel and remedial help is obviously needed, and the company is well aware of this need.

Sam reported calling the company on Sunday morning and being told first that there was a repair crew on the way from Wimberly, but it had run off the road - then being disconnected. He called back, and a different customer service operator told him that no, the repair crew was already there. So Sam drove to the Windmill site, and not only was no one there but no one had been there. When word got out what mixed up information Sam had been given, social media immediately blew up with reports from residents of the confused information Aqua's customer service operators were giving out. Everyone's frustrations were all spilling out all over the website. Reliable communications with the company were obviously non-existent.

Brian continued: When we realized on Sunday that the lack of power at the Cherry Ridge location was not a glitch but a complete failure, we decided to get down here and repair the Windmill location immediately. So we begged and borrowed to get the needed parts together and started down here. That's when the crew ran off the road in Wimberly.

At this point several residents voiced complaints about their experiences with the customer service operators and other higher up Aqua employees reached by phone. More than one resident was accused by Aqua employees of being called liar when they repeatedly called, over the next two days and reported having no water service.

Bob stated that the communications between the residents and the company were indeed shameful, but things were being done to change that situation. First, Eagle Creek Ranch is going to be used as a template, company wide, to set up action committees made up of community residents that would have names and phone numbers for company employees, and the employees would have contact information for the committee members. The committees and direct communication channels that are set up here will be used in the other 270 communities in Texas serviced by the company. Eagle Creek Ranch was not the only community experiencing problems that required accurate and dependable communications.

At this point more complaints were voiced by residents, particularly about the lack of notice of the system's being completely shut down so there was no time to plan for alternative ways to meet the crisis. Once again Bob apologized profusely and tried to

explain the problems the company experienced because of the weather and the inability to identify the extent of the power problem at the Eagle Creek Blvd. location. A resident also noted that the company did not identify customers who were challenged, i.e. elderly or infirm, and would need extra help in case of water delivery problems. Bob agreed that the company had no way of identifying these customers and no way of notifying emergency services of customers in crisis. Aaron responded that identification of such people with a plan for reaching them in such time of crisis would be a good task for the action committee. Bob agreed this was an excellent undertaking for the committee and could be very helpful to the company as well as the community.

Bob continued: Second, we're working on a website with a virtual map where you can put in your address or zip code and find if there is an issue in the system, such as a power outage or a main break or some other problem that may effect water problems. But this website is not going to be ready for maybe a month or more, at least late March.

Sam brought the discussion back to the action committee by again stating the need for better communication with the company and the need for more knowledge of the residents. He stated that ECROA was the perfect vehicle for amassing this information, as we already had much of the residents' contact information, and with a contact name at the company anyone on the Board could reach if the need arose, communication could be much improved. And the property owner's association is already in the process of setting up the mechanics of being able to reach out directly to our residents – not through the website, not through Next Door, but a direct line to residents of Eagle Creek Ranch.

Bob stated that the next thing that needed to happen was to get this action committee organized and functional. There is a need for a person at the company who will have the full-time responsibility of communicating with the committee. That person is not yet available, so the company has to deal with filling that position.

Several residents thanked Aqua Texas for their providing bottled water to the residents of Eagle Creek Ranch, even though it took four days for that to happen. And thanks to the volunteers who handed out the water, two cases per household, at the distribution site. But in the future, it was asked that water would be provided earlier in the crisis so the residents would not have to go so long without any water provided at all.

Aaron asked if Aqua Texas has what it needs from us to move forward? Bob replied to coordinate their activities he will need to know who will be on the action committee so an action plan can be created to address a future emergency as it arises. Aaron promised to make that information available to the company as soon as possible. He also promised to get hold of representatives for Eagle Creek Estates and inform them of the committee's activities.

Aaron admonished the residents to give the Board some time to set up the committee to work with Aqua Texas and in the meantime not to set up any other committees or groups to try to address the problems discussed here tonight. Otherwise we will never have the coordinated action we are requesting from Aqua.

A resident requested that Aqua Texas meet with us in the next three to four months to make sure everything is set up to proceed and get an idea how this committee and the company will be working together. Bob replied that three to four months would be about right, and the Board just needed to put them on the agenda, and they will be here. Aaron asked that anyone with questions please write them down to make sure they're addressed when we meet together again. We want to hear solutions from the company, so we need to make sure they have all the information they need and answer all our questions so we all can work toward the solutions.

Aaron moved the discussion along to the remainder of the agenda by telling residents if they were not interested in the rest of the Board meeting they were free to leave. The Board members then took up the remaining agenda items. The remaining items were tabled until the next meeting. At 9:08 Sam moved the meeting adjourned. Heather seconded and the meeting adjourned.