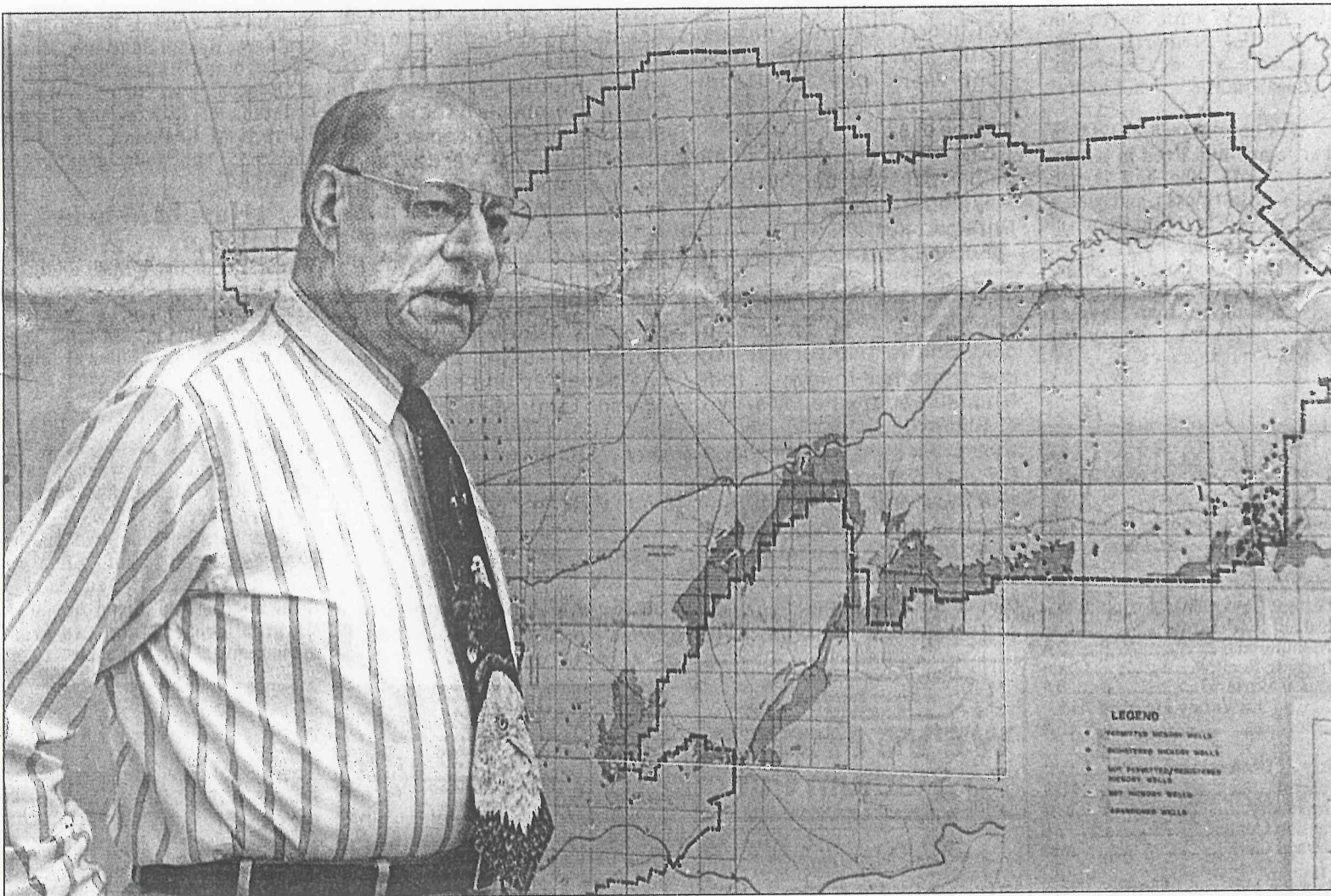


Brady, Angelo wrangling over water

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S-T Photo by Mike How

Brady Mayor H.L. 'Bud' Gober talks about San Angelo's request to add more wells to Brady's only water source, the Hickory Aquifer. San Angelo wants to develop water rights

bought more than 20 years ago. Brady officials say the request to siphon the Hickory Aquifer for 15,000 acre feet a year is excessive.

Coveted resource at core of squabble

By BILL MILLER
Staff Writer

Infectious, baritone laughter punctuates every conversation with Brady Mayor Bud Gober, but the city's fight with San Angelo over the Hickory Aquifer makes him somber.

He compliments San Angelo for its amenities and commerce. He considers San Angelo Mayor Dick Funk a friend and colleague.

But with two months to go before he leaves office, Gober, a four-term mayor, regrets hav-

ing to butt heads over how much water San Angelo will take from the aquifer.

The fight has divided two normally amicable communities, and Gober is sure it will last a good while. He has agreed to continue chairing a coalition of Central Texas communities that dispute San Angelo's plans to use the aquifer.

It's nothing personal, Gober said, "It's just the law of nature."

"Anybody you talk to will say water is more important than oil," he said. "It's the

lifblood for anyone.

"The aquifer is where we get all of our water. If those wells go dry, the city of Brady will be blowing away."

San Angelo wants to develop water rights it bought in a McCulloch County well field more than 20 years ago. The water is intended to be an emergency backup supply during severe drought.

Municipalities and farmers depend on it

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aquifer, which has existed for thousands of years. It's administered by the Hickory Underground Water Conservation District No. 1.

A staff member for the district said there is no definitive measure of how much water the aquifer holds, but it flows beneath a wide area of Central Texas, including Concho, Menard, Kimble, Mason, McCulloch and San Saba counties. Its maximum depth is 3,000 feet.

Peanut farmers at its most shallow edge, called the "out-crop," particularly fear San Angelo's straw in the aquifer. They claim that once this area is drawn down, they're out of business.

The aquifer recharges itself by about 4,000 acre feet a year, which is the same amount that the current users consume. Brady uses 2,709 acre feet a year.

But since the recharge level is considered miniscule, the Hickory Aquifer is designated as a non-renewable resource.

Last week the water district agreed to consider San Angelo's future applications to use the water, but only for an amount five times less than what the city wanted.

Brady officials shot another salvo by filing a district court appeal to overrule the water district. If approved, it would force San Angelo to start from scratch in its permit applications to drill 13 more wells in the aquifer.

The city already has nine wells in the field southeast of Melvin, but they're capped for now.

Brady officials say San Angelo's request to siphon the aquifer for 15,000 acre feet a year is excessive.

Funk counters that the city would tap the Hickory only when regular sources run low at Twin Buttes and Ivie reservoirs.

"It's clear that they don't want us to have any right to what we have bought and paid for down there," he said. "That does not fit.

"We have to clarify our rights to use that water."

Gober said San Angelo should wait until it actually needs the water, before requesting it.

"If San Angelo was in dire need of water, we'd be the first to help them," Gober said. "When that time comes, let's talk about it."

Funk insists the wells must be operational the second an emergency occurs.

He bristles at the coalition's fear that San Angelo would recklessly deplete the aquifer.

"I don't want any headlines implying that the city is taking something when we do everything we can to conserve," he said. "We'll never do anything intentionally that isn't fair to everyone ... and that would include the city of Brady."

Funk would not speculate on whether San Angelo would file counter litigation in the dispute, but Gober said it could last far into the future.

"I expect it will go beyond district court to the court of appeals in Austin, maybe even higher," he said. "That's bad and should never happen.

"We're good neighbors with San Angelo. In fact, we're good customers of San Angelo. You go into that Shannon hospital, and you'll see half the patients are McCulloch County residents.

"All we're trying to do is protect the city's water rights, and the rights of all these counties around here."

Funk complained that San Angelo continues to be misunderstood in the dispute.

"We're not a heartless community and that needs to be conveyed," he said. "We're not insensitive to rural water needs. Brady is very important to us and we would much prefer to work with them.

"But what we buy and pay for, we expect to take."



Smith