

East Texas News (Polk County Enterprise)

## County OKs reinvestment zone at dam

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By Valerie Reddell

LIVINGSTON — Polk County Commissioners unanimously approved creating a reinvestment zone for the proposed site of the Lake Livingston Hydroelectric Project that **East Texas Electric Cooperative** (ETEC) is developing. The reinvestment zone is a preliminary step to obtain a property tax abatement under Texas' Property Redevelopment and Tax Abatement Act.

ETEC is continuing negotiations to purchase the 20-acre Southland Park tract below the Lake Livingston Dam. The property is currently owned by Polk County and was purchased using federal grant funds after the area suffered repeated flooding. **Ryan Thomas**, chief financial officer for ETEC, said the 20 acres will be used as a staging area during the 24-month construction phase of the project.

The permanent plant site will use three to four acres, the rest of the site will be used as a nature park with a birding platform, native plants and walking paths. The existing gazebo will be removed and replaced with a nicer birding platform, Thomas said. ETEC is consulting with the Livingston-Polk County Chamber of Commerce and Executive Director Sydney Murphy is coordinating efforts among its nature tourism committee, the newly created Master Naturalist chapter, the Bird and Bloom Club and other interested organizations.

"During construction, the \$75 million facility will create 80 to 100 construction jobs," Thomas told commissioners. "Forty percent of those will be from the local economy."

Once complete, plant operations will create about five permanent jobs, according to Thomas. ETEC and the Trinity River Authority are continuing to work out those details.

Brian Lawson, project manager for GDS & Associates said their time line calls for the plant coming online in late 2013 or early 2014. It will provide enough electricity to power 12,000 households for a year.

The plant will not impact lake levels, since TRA will dictate how much water is diverted through the hydroelectric plant. Monitoring below the plant also

ensures dissolved oxygen levels and temperatures remain favorable to fish populations, Thomas added.

County Judge John Thompson pointed out that entities involved in the project have adequate time to work out remaining details. ETEC has applied for a permit from the Federal Energy Regulatory Agency and expects an answer by the end of the year.

During the public hearing audience member Jim Johnson asked Thomas who will control the nature park. Thomas replied that there are some remaining legal details to work out, but ETEC will be responsible for maintaining walkways and other improvements and ensuring safety in the area. ETEC also plans to reimburse the Pct. 1 Road and Bridge Department to upgrade the park road that runs through the area.

Clean audit report Independent Auditor Robert Belt of Belt, Harris & Associates LLLP of Houston, told commissioners he gave a clean, unqualified opinion of the county's financial statements for the year ended Sept. 30, 2009, and that they meet all required tests.

The general revenue fund increased fund balances by \$689,000, despite taking a heavy hit to revenue when interest rates on investments tumbled globally last year. Polk County began the year with a fund balance of \$5,392,000 and ended with a balance of \$6,082,000. Thompson gave much of the credit for that positive change to county employees and elected officials. When the fiscal year 2009 budget was being drafted, the county was earning an average interest rate of 2.287 percent on funds in TexPool, according to County Treasurer Nola Reneau based on a statement dated Sept. 30, 2008.

According to the latest monthly report Reneau has received for January 2010 investments, the current average monthly rate is 0.1630 percent. That drastic change in interest rate caused investment revenue to change from \$198,676 in 2008 to \$49,723 in 2009, according to County Auditor Ray Stelly.

The complete report from Belt, Harris & Associates will be available for viewing at the county's website, [www.polk.co.tx.us/lps/countyoffices/countyAuditor.html](http://www.polk.co.tx.us/lps/countyoffices/countyAuditor.html).

Child Welfare Board report Lou Liles, supervisor for Child Protective Services in Polk and San Jacinto counties, and Leon Bailey a longtime volunteer for the Polk County Child Welfare Board told commissioners the group is seeing a major increase in the number of children being served. At Christmas, the

board hosted 90 children at its annual Christmas party. Since then several children have been removed from their homes, Liles said. Two children have died, one as a result of abuse and neglect. Last year, 144 Polk County children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect.