

Hillebrandt Bayou/Neches River Tidal I-Plan Work Group

Meeting Notes – April 12, 2021

Location – Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

Michael Schramm	TWRI
Anna Gitter	TWRI
Lucas Gregory	TWRI
Nicole Reed	TCEQ
Nefi Garza	City of San Antonio
Taylor Shelton	Port Neches
Molly Villarreal	City of Beaumont
Jeannie Mahan	LNVA
Carla Ethridge	ANRA
Unidentified Caller/Individual	

Meeting started: 1:31pm

Michael Schramm (MS): Stated this is an informal discussion to better learn of management practices to address homeless issues in the watershed. Nefi Garza was invited to share his knowledge and experiences of addressing homelessness in the Upper San Antonio River I-Plan.

Nefi Garza (NG): Provided a brief introduction. Garza is the Assistant Director of Public Works for the City of San Antonio and works in the MS4/stormwater division. Information regarding restoration and watershed management work in San Antonio was shared. Garza described a successful stream restoration project, yet still had issues with elevated bacteria concentrations. Wildlife was identified as the predominant bacteria source but was directed by the EPA to focus on human sources contributing to bacteria. It was later determined that homelessness might be a contributing factor (identified to be living in culverts and other areas along the water body).

The City of San Antonio stormwater division has a crew established to clean up homeless encampments and debris. There are numerous potential legal and social issues that make it difficult to remove/relocate homeless encampments. The Department works with numerous entities to address the issue (Police, TxDOT, NGO's/Faith Based Community, Social Services). In general, when an encampment is established in a culvert or waterway, it takes about 2 weeks to move people. The Department will make a visit with Social Services to encourage people to take advantage of other housing resources provided by NGOs and the City. Law Enforcement comes to ensure personnel safety. Once the site is empty, waste and debris is removed.

Taylor Shelton (Port Neches) noted that TxDOT is working on establishing new policies in TxDOT owned right of ways.

The City had to hire a contractor to handle biowaste. Addressing this issue has been a challenge given the sensitive nature of it. The homeless encampments are on public property which makes it incredibly challenging to for relocation of these individuals.

In load terms, sewer overflows are a greater contributor than homeless encampments.

Michael Schramm: Stated that addressing the homelessness issue is a bigger concern than a water quality issue and requires lots of resources, money and time to address. Asked if the resources devoted to homeless issue is a “drop in the bucket” relative to expenses associated with SSOs and Inflow and Infiltration.

NG: Stated that it is. One thing the City attempted was to establish drop structure and catchment systems near established camps so they wouldn't have to keep chasing the problem and make it easier (less expensive) to clean up debris associated with the camps. However, the transient nature of the population made that ineffective. The cost of cleaning up the biowaste and sharps at encampments has not been too high. They established a contract with the same contractor that works with the Police Department and it has been cost effective.

MS: How do you evaluate effectiveness of homelessness management measures?

NG: Effectiveness is measured by safety for staff. There is a significant human health concern related to cleaning up homeless sites.

Molly Villarreal (Beaumont): States that her city currently doesn't have the resources to address this issue. Will have to rely on non-profits or different jurisdictions to help. Often encampments found are under TxDOT or drainage district jurisdictions. Still trying to quantify this issue and its impact.

NG: Initially City of San Antonio didn't have resources to address the issue, but have been able to bring SAPD, Health and Human Services and SARA to assist. City Council and City Manager became involved in the issue and a task force was developed. A coordination of multiple entities is needed.

Taking photos and bringing awareness to the issue can help with gathering support.

Recommended removing underbrush and raising the canopy in wooded areas since homeless don't want to be seen. Can work with TxDOT to do this.

In closing, stated that the homelessness issue can't be solved by one group. Takes multiple entities. Faith based organizations are also helpful to work with. Very little can actually be done by the City to address the homelessness issue.

Meeting Ended: 2:16pm