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Battle: groundwater

Hays Town fights the fight no one else wants to

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Photo By: Collin Richie

Town says he's fighting for Baton Rouge's water so his children and grandchildren and their generations can benefit.

Sometimes important issues bubble to the surface only to drain right back into the collective unconscious. For more than 50 years scientists have known that Baton Rouge's world-class drinking water is in jeopardy from saltwater intrusion. A study comes out, a meeting is held and another study is commissioned. In all that time, little has been done to make the public aware of the issue or to call on major groundwater users to correct the problem. Every passing year of the status-quo approach brings the city one step closer to drinking from the Mississippi River.

Unless Hays Town has his say.

In 2009, Town, son of the acclaimed architect, was busy reinventing himself. After a long and successful career as a contractor, the 1958 LSU alum enrolled in graduate school at his alma mater. "I wanted to learn about the weather," he says. "That's why I went back."

As with so many students, however, once on campus his goals took a detour. During a class on hydrology, he first heard about saltwater intrusion. "I thought I would research it for a term paper, so I went out to the U.S. Geological Survey, and it was obvious. I knew within the first hour of looking at the charts and graphs they gave me that there was a problem."

Ironically, the problem is rooted in our water's great qualities. Water from the Southern Hills Aquifer is almost completely mineral free. Think super-soft. That means it is perfect for everything from lathering up a bar of soap to making clean steam in a massive boiler.

Local industry is possible largely because of this simple geo-economic fact: a no-cost competitive advantage is yours for the taking if you can drill a well deep enough to tap into it. Of the hundreds of wells scattered around the parish, the majority are clustered in the north Baton Rouge industrial district, and they draw half of all the groundwater used locally.

As water is withdrawn from the aquifer, however, super-saline groundwater is pulled northward through a subterranean barrier called the Baton Rouge fault. (You may have wondered about that abrupt hill on College Drive or by City Park—that's the surface of the fault line.) Each passing day salt water creeps nearer to both industrial and public supply wells. The faster water is pumped out of the ground the sooner local wells begin to turn salty.

The science of groundwater became Town's obsession, but he also wondered about the impact for Baton Rouge. The more he learned about the looming decline in safe drinking water, the more concerned he became.

Last year Town led the formation of an advocacy group called Baton Rouge Citizens to Save Our Water, Inc., and he began calling elected officials, industry representatives and anyone else who would talk to him about the issue. So far, the group's media campaign has included the launch of a website—

savebrwater.com—and a series of television public service spots. At his urging last year, the Metro Council and the Capital Region Legislative Delegation requested the Capital Area Ground Water Conservation Commission (CAGWCC) hold public meetings on the issue of saltwater intrusion. The meetings were packed.

Meanwhile, Town kept plugging away at his master's thesis. His faculty advisor, state climatologist Barry Keim, was impressed. "Hays and I kicked around several MS thesis topics in climatology for him to work on, but he really had a passion for saving Baton Rouge's groundwater," Keim recalls. "I caved in and let him do it. It turned into a very important thesis."

Town is Keim's oldest graduating student, having earned his MS degree at 78 years young. "I can't even imagine how this record could ever be broken," Keim says.

Last January, just before the most recent scientific report came out, Commissioner of Conservation Jim Welch wrote a letter to the CAGWCC stating the state's position that the "aquifer system located in the Baton Rouge area [is] not being used in a manner that can continue indefinitely without causing unacceptable environmental, economic, social, or health consequences."

And yet, since then, nothing has been done, Town laments. "They have recommended little or no action or changes to solve the problem," he says. "To me, they seem to take pride in not being accountable to the public. The release of the USGS study only verifies that what we have been claiming—the fresh water supply is in serious danger—is, in fact, correct."

To ensure a sustainable water supply Town says two things are critical. First, he says, "industries need to reduce the amount of drinking water for their processes and use filtered river water." He is quick to point out that most of these plants are right there on the river anyway. At the same time local residents need to educate themselves about the issue and embrace water conservation.

Town urges everyone who cares about Baton Rouge's drinking water supply to get involved. "People need to write their legislators and council representatives. Nothing is going to change if we don't stay on top of the issue. The way we're going, people are going to be forced to drink from the Mississippi River, and industry is going to haveto use [river water] too. Everybody loses if we don't act."

Now that his master's degree is complete, Town plans to continue pursuing his loves: family, football and flying. And he'll keep drawing attention to some of the best drinking water in the country. "Well," he says, "I'm not going to be around when we have to look elsewhere for our water, but I would hate that I didn't try to do something. I am doing this for our kids and for grandkids."