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Commissioners reject variances for firm seeking to recycle wastewater

The **Travis County Commissioners Court** has rejected two variance requests from a Houston-based company that is seeking to recycle wastewater byproducts. The firm, **Synagro Technologies, Inc.**, still hopes to apply the so-called “sewage sludge” to land that’s used for pasture outside of Garfield.

The court’s action came amid substantial community protest. This included a nine-page petition that, according to **County Judge Sam Biscoe**, featured between 60 and 70 names. According to **Travis County Environmental Program Manager Tom Weber**, Synagro has received the approval of five of the eight residents that would be most directly affected by its program.

In denying the variance requests, the court has shrunk the acreage that Synagro is eligible to use from 485 to roughly 80. In order for the project to move forward, the **Texas Commission on Environmental Quality** must first approve a series of permits for the project. It has yet to complete that process.

Precinct 1 Commissioner Ron Davis signaled his opposition to the idea early. As part of a public hearing on the matter, he told his colleagues that he wouldn’t support the variances.

“Based on what I’ve heard ... (this) is overbearing and I don’t think we need to grant a variance, period,” he said.

The court also heard from some of the residents of the area. **Maria Elsa Reyes** told the commissioners through a translator that she and her neighbors don’t “want this project to go on.”

“This project is not going to affect eight people or nine people,” she continued. “It’s going to affect 60.”

On its Web site, Synagro calls the wastewater leftovers “a nutrient-rich organic by-product (sic) resulting from the treatment of wastewater.” It continues to detail the process that it uses to apply the stuff to land.

“(S)olids produced during the wastewater treatment process are stabilized/disinfected to become biosolids and can be managed in a liquid, semi-solid or solid form,” the site reads. “Eventually biosolids return to the soil in the form of fertilizers and soil amendments, where they help crops grow by replenishing the soil. They also help preserve landfills, promote tree growth, and replace topsoil — even slow runoff and soil erosion.”

The two Synagro representatives who attended the hearing referred questions to the company’s general counsel, **Joseph Page**. Page was traveling late Tuesday afternoon when *In Fact Daily* attempted to contact him.

The waste that Synagro plans to use would come from the City of Austin. The variances the company requested were for setback distances from individual residences and the 100-year floodplain.

After a lengthy executive session, Biscoe made the motion to deny Synagro's requests. In his findings, he cited the company's failure to meet the burden of proof in terms of its inability to locate its project at a different site. He also said that the firm "did not provide adequate assurances that they would mitigate all adverse impacts on residents and land adjacent to the site."

Biscoe told *In Fact Daily* that the court did the extent of what it could in terms of regulating of the site. He added that he is still concerned about what it has left. "There are things that you can do to reduce (the) impact," he said. "The other thing is that with kids and families there ... even the best practices in the world would not eliminate all of the adverse impact."