

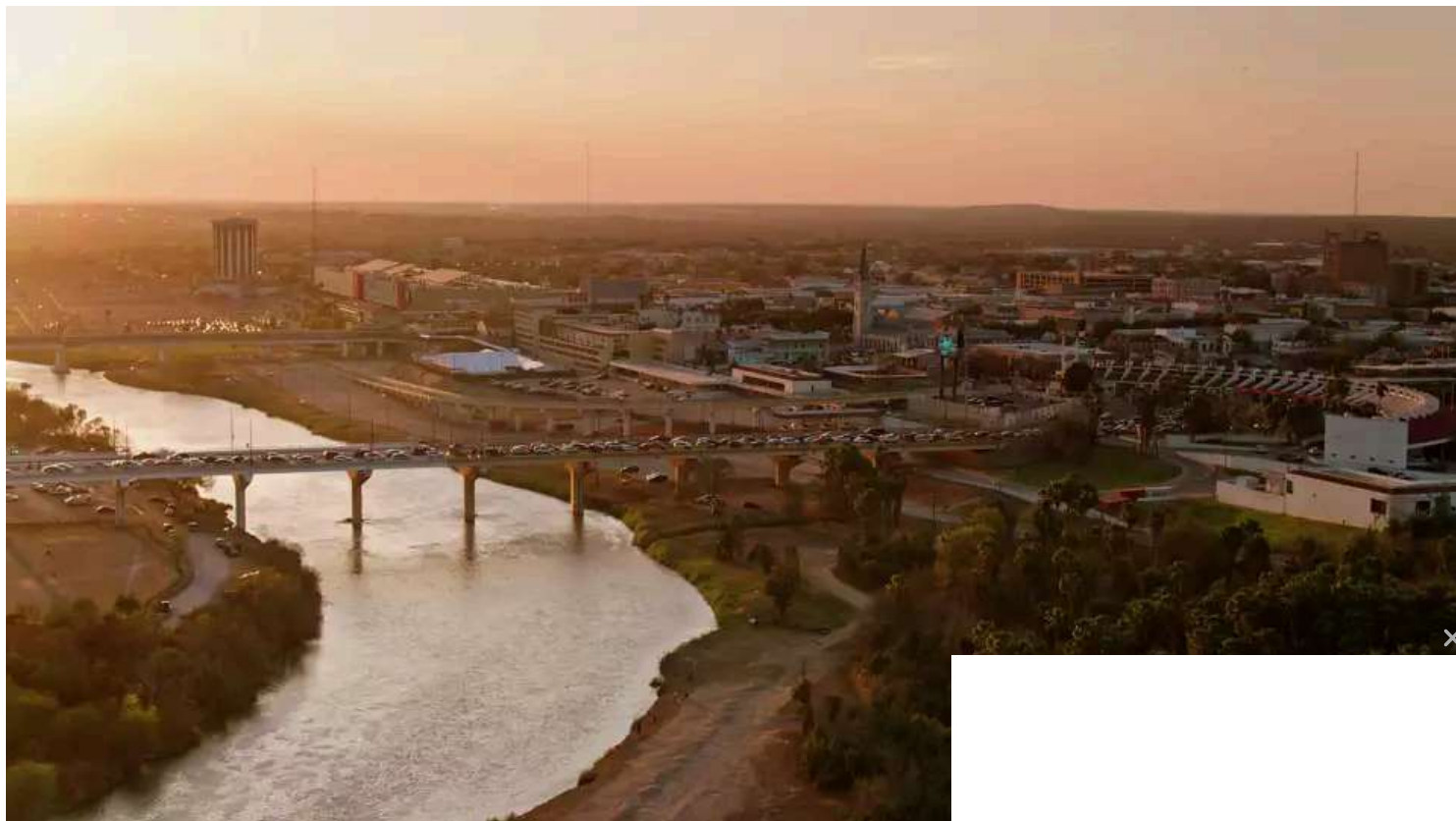
LOCAL

City to reduce Rio Grande reliance 40% by 2040

Laredo revisits \$290M groundwater project with deadline approaching

By **David Gomez Jr.**, Staff Writer

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Aerial view of Laredo, Texas at sunset over looking the Rio Grande. Laredo hopes to reduce its water reliance on the river by 40% before 2040. halbergman/Getty Images/iStockphoto

A \$290 million groundwater project pitched as a long-term secondary water source for Laredo is moving back into state and federal funding cycles as city leaders say they want to reduce reliance on the Rio Grande by at least 40% in the coming decades.

David Earl, general counsel for Legacy Water Supply Corp., told Laredo leaders this week the three-phase project could move into acquisitions and construction as early as late 2026 if financing falls into place.

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“It basically is going to take at least two years to get construction to the point where the pipelines are moving to Laredo, possibly three years to get them complete and operational,” Earl said.

The proposal calls for developing more than 20 deep brackish groundwater wells — two have already been drilled — acquiring existing wells and pipeline assets and constructing a pipeline to connect Legacy’s treatment facility to the city’s 60-inch transmission main. The wells draw from aquifers in Webb County, including the Carrizo Formation, at depths of roughly 3,000 feet.

Laredo City Manager Joe Neeb said City Council has asked for an update as part of a broader push to prioritize secondary water sources over the next year.

“What I looked at as far as what the Council was aiming for with the secondary water was kind of a gut check, kind of an update of where we are at, where are we going with this?” Neeb said.

Laredo currently relies entirely on the Rio Grande for its drinking water. Under its long-term master plan, the city has identified 2040 as a key benchmark year when projected growth could exceed available usable water rights. x

“2040 is one of those dates that is very important to us because that’s our supply capacity level for our water rights that we currently have that are usable,” Neeb said. “It’s a realistic location.”

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Neeb said the city's goal is to reduce reliance on the river by about 40% by supplementing supplies with groundwater.

Legacy's project is one of three memorandums of understanding the city has signed related to potential secondary sources. Most of the concepts under consideration involve groundwater from nearby aquifers in Webb or Val Verde counties.

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As part of that effort, the city, Webb County and Legacy are participating in a \$50,000 blending study to determine how brackish groundwater would mix with Rio Grande surface water inside Laredo's treatment plants. The groundwater has higher total dissolved solids — about 1,700 milligrams per liter compared with roughly 600 milligrams per liter from the river — and officials want to ensure compatibility before introducing it into the system.

“Our goal right now is working with Legacy Water Corp. in order to feed water all the way out up to Colonias in the south,” Neeb said. “So it all has to work for our plants as well.”

Earl outlined multiple funding avenues the corporation is pursuing.

Legacy is preparing a formal submission for the Texas Water Development Board's State Revolving Fund with a March 6 application deadline. The company has also applied for the board's D-Fund low-interest financing program and has undergone an initial technical review.

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In addition, Earl said the project has been preliminarily vetted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for potential congressional funding and the North American Development Bank is being explored as another possible financing partner.

A previous funding attempt fell short after Legacy submitted two separate applications that each scored well but were not combined administratively by the water board.

“Had they combined (the two applications), we would have been in the money,” Earl said. “We had to wait until this cycle to reapply.”

Before any state funds can be closed, however, written agreements between the city, county, Legacy and a related municipal management district must be executed. Bond counsel has circulated draft agreements and Earl urged officials to move forward so the project can remain eligible.

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Neeb confirmed he remains on the Legacy Water Supply Corp. board, though briefly as the system is still being developed. He described the current “gro the bucket” compared with the city’s long-term needs.

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Still, city leaders say secondary water development is becoming increasingly urgent as growth continues and the 2040 planning horizon approaches.

“Every year gets us closer to that window,” Neeb said.

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David Gomez Jr. is an alumnus of Texas A&M International University, likes pizza too much, and enjoys Spielberg, Nolan, and Scorsese films.

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