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Amid soaring Texas water needs, plans for a desalination plant stir controversy near Texas City

By **Rebekah F. Ward**, Staff Writer

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Aerial photos of the proposed Bayshore Desalination Facility in Texas City.
Courtesy of EPCOR

Months after drought-stricken Corpus Christi scrapped a project to turn salty bay water into drinking water, the state may permit a privately owned Galveston plant using similar technology.

Residents who live near the proposed Bayshore Desalination Facility peppered company leaders with questions at a public meeting Thursday, saying they only recently learned of the plan and were concerned about its environmental impact.

The facility, pitched by EPCOR Utilities at NRG's long-abandoned P.H. Robinson power plant site on the edge of Texas City, would draw about 83 million gallons of water from Galveston Bay for treatment each day. Filtered sludge would go to a landfill, while about 50 million gallons a day of salty brine mixed with raw seawater would flow back into the bay.

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“Over the next 50 years, the Houston area needs more new wet water than any other region,” said Michael Irlbeck, EPCOR’s director of business development, suggesting desalination would be key to meeting that demand.

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Irlbeck presented EPCOR’s plan to a room full of nearly 100 of the project’s neighbors on Thursday after the citizen-run Bayshore Town Square asked him to answer questions from residents at a fire station half a mile from the boundary of the industrial site.

He came prepared with slides and the rationale for the new technology: It would be more reliable in a drought than surface water, and would not cause the ground to sink from groundwater extraction, like other areas in the Houston region.

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It would also repurpose features left by the former P.H. Robinson facility but pull in a fraction of the water volume that the decommissioned power plant once used.

Questions raised at town hall



EPCOR business development lead Michael Irlbeck presents details on the company's proposed Texas City desalination plant to a room full of residents on March 26, 2026.

Rebekah F. Ward/Rebekah F. Ward / Houston Chronicle

Frustrated meeting attendees were armed with questions, honing in on how most people in unincorporated areas near the proposed facility found out about the idea two years after EPCOR started planning and months after the company submitted its wastewater permit application to Texas' environmental regulators in October.

READ MORE: [A desalination plant could be coming to Galveston Bay](#)

“One thing people feel is that because we don't have a municipal governmental agency here, because we're unincorporated, people view us as being less. We've been described as cockroaches before,” said Gina Smith, one of three local organizers of Bayshore Town Square.

“The largest concern is, why didn't we know about this, and who kept it from us?” Smith said.

After word of the plans started spreading widely in the area in January, community fears began to surface. Residents worried about the Canadian ownership of the company. They were concerned about the price of the treated water. They wondered where the waste would go.

But for many residents of unincorporated communities in Bacliff, Bayview and San Leon, their biggest fear was for the health of their beloved bay.

“My concern is how it's going to impact the environmental quality of our bay water,” said Paulette Janak, who lives on the shorefront with her husband and watches her kids and grandkids fish off the pier.

Even after Irlbeck said that the facility would keep discharged water within a healthy salinity range for the ecosystem, Janak was still worried about the portion of the bay near her home. EPCOR would be monitoring water within a couple hundred feet of the shore, Irlbeck confirmed, but the company could not measure salinity right at the outflow point.

“What about the water that's at the end of our piers, which is really close to the discharge? That's going to be impacted,” Janak said.



Gina Smith, one leader of the Bayshore Town Square community group, stands next to fellow group leader Tony Poynor and asks residents' questions on EPCOR's planned desalination plant to company representative Michael Irlbeck on March 26, 2026.

Rebekah F. Ward/Rebekah F. Ward / Houston Chronicle

Corpus Christi lessons

Joey Palermo also lives along the shore and does his share of fishing, crabbing and shrimping. He was familiar with Corpus Christi's desalination plans and knew the city pulled back not only due to skyrocketing costs, but also because of widespread worry that salty discharge would create "dead zones" in the bay.

ON DROUGHT: [Corpus Christi is on the brink of a water shortage: 'The clock is ticking'](#)

But Palermo said he felt better leaving Thursday's meeting than he had coming in.

"You have to take it with a grain of salt, but it sounds a bit more positive than I initially thought," he said, noting the plan sounded like "a totally different system" than the one Corpus officials had canceled.

Irlbeck told attendees that while Corpus Christi plans proposed to use an underwater sprinkler system to spread out salty discharge right in the bay, EPCOR intended to follow the country's only two active seawater desalination plants and dilute the salty brine before pushing it back out.

Potable water supply in Corpus Christi is nearing a cliff after years of drought and industrial growth strained its resources. The city intended to fix the situation with a desalination facility, but canceled the contract in September after building costs increased from \$160 million in 2019 to \$1.2 billion last year.

The decision drew a swift response from Gov. Greg Abbott, who said in early March that the state could soon "take over and micromanage that city." Earlier this week, the city council voted to negotiate with a partially-constructed private desalination plant owned by Corpus Christi Polymers to buy drinking water from them instead, though the crisis point could come before construction ends.

Tony Poynor, another leader of Bayshore Town Square alongside Smith, is also an elected member of Bacliff's Municipal Utility District. He learned about EPCOR's plans because the company wanted to work with the district on a six-month pilot for the desalination process; its members are still considering the request, but Poynor sees the benefits.

"Central Texas has a big water issue. We're blessed in this area, and having this in our backyard, I believe, is a positive, not a negative for us, as long as it doesn't affect the ecosystem," Poynor said. Still, he felt all community members should get their questions answered.

Desalination plant in early stages

Smith, who was in charge of asking many of the group's queries at the Thursday night meeting, pressed for responses.

Irlbeck answered many questions in detail, but to others he said the company did not expect impacts, or that they were still gathering data.

"There's zero way that you are going to say to me or any of these people that this is not going to affect us in some way," Smith said after receiving several similar answers. "How can we weigh the cost benefit analysis of y'all being here, if we don't know what that is, because you keep telling us that it has no real effect?"

EPCOR worked with Texas A&M Galveston researchers on an initial impact study that suggested the plant would keep salinity at a good range, but the company was still waiting on more details, permits and the pilot program, Irlbeck said.

"I know you guys feel like you're coming in late on this. That's our fault. But we are at the beginning of the process," he told the crowd.

He also said that the facility's reverse osmosis-treated drinking water would be sold on the open market – but that local distribution would save on transmission costs, and the company would love to open talks with interested utility districts nearby.