Pond at Baker Civic Club park sparks public controversy

By JAMES MINTON
Baker-Zachary bureau

BAKER -- The future of a pond -- an insurance liability to one group and a neighborhood fishing hole to another -- will be discussed in at least two upcoming meetings, spokesmen for the opposing groups said Monday.

The Baker Civic Club's plans to fill in the pond at the club's three-acre park on North Magnolia Drive erupted into a public controversy during the weekend when a large group of protesters rallied at the park Saturday morning.

The state Department of Environmental Quality entered the picture in response to complaints that broken concrete from a service station demolition project was to be used to fill in part of the pond. The material was removed Sunday after DEQ investigators determined it was contaminated with gasoline.

Civic Club President Ann Couvillon said the group's liability insurance premium increased $500 this year after a five-year policy expired, and the insurance company advised the club to fill in the pond or expect additional premium increases.

The park also includes a Little League baseball diamond the organization leases for $1 a year to the baseball program, and a meeting hall that is rented for weddings, exercise classes and other functions, she said. Other organizations also use the hall for meetings, she said.

"The pond is ugly, contaminated and gross," Couvillon said. "When Little League is in season, the danger is much higher. We tried to give it to the city once before but the city was not interested. They didn't want the liability."

"The pond is used by kids on a regular basis," Baker resident Glynn Fleming said. "It's been used as a public facility for 30 to 40 years. It's the only place in Baker for kids to go fishing unless you want them to ride their bikes down Highway 19 to go to Greenwood Park."

Couvillon said Saturday's protest "was blown out of proportion," and that she left a Friday meeting with DEQ representative Ross Williams and residents opposed to filling in the pond "under the impression that everything was understood."

She said the club agreed with Williams' assessment that the concrete was contaminated with gasoline and should not be dumped in the pond.

Couvillon said the complaining residents are invited to a 7:30 p.m. March 16 meeting at the Civic Club's building to present their proposals for maintaining the pond and offsetting the increasing insurance costs.

The club president said proceeds from the group's one annual fund raiser, a Mardi Gras pageant, are used to pay the insurance, award a $500 scholarship and make donations to the Baker Volunteer Fire Department, the Little League program and needy families.

"Unfortunately, in the last five years, I don't remember seeing anyone who's fussing about the pond do anything to raise a quarter," Couvillon said.

Fleming said Baker activities are covered by a variety of news media, and "if you have problems financing something, then through the media you could advertise that you need some money."

"I would have done that first. Since the public uprising, there have been many offers of donations to keep the pond open," Fleming said. "The donations were there before. It's just that nobody asked for them."

He said the liability issue may be a smokescreen for club members who are interested in expanding the clubhouse's parking lot.

Fleming said a 7 p.m. meeting is scheduled Friday at the Baker Municipal Building "to gather forces and information to combat the filling-in of the pond. Then we'll go to their March 16 meeting."