September 8, 2025

City of Corpus Christi

Cameron Abrams
Reporter
The Texan
1011 San Jacinto Blvd., Ste. 315
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Mr. Abrams:

CITY COUNCIL

Carolyn Vaughn
AT LARGE
COUNCIL MEMBER
Carolyn.Vaughn2@cctexas.com

PO Box 9277
Corpus Christi Texas
78469-9277
Phone 361-826-3107
Fax 361-826-3113
www.cctexas.com

The decision to halt the Inner Harbor Desalination Project was not about environmental opposition, nor was it about a lack of vision for our city's future. It was about responsibility – responsibility to the taxpayers and ratepayers who rely on the City of Corpus Christi. My vote was based on the cost – 30 million gallons a day (MGD) for $1.2 billion. Though we're retired from our business now, I haven't forgotten what it takes to run one. Simply saying that "it will just cost what it costs" is an unacceptable business practice.

I was on the Council when this project was first introduced. The estimated cost was under $200 million. That figure has now ballooned. I'll say it again, $1.2 billion, and that doesn't include the cost of operations. Continuing down that path would have locked Corpus Christi ratepayers into decades of crushing debt and higher utility bills. The majority of this council recognized that reality and voted accordingly.

Some have tried to suggest that this decision means Corpus Christi is "closed for business." Nothing could be further from the truth. A single project does not define our community. We have multiple water supply initiatives underway, including groundwater, water reuse, and regional partnerships, that will provide reliable, affordable water, placing less financial burden on our residents. These projects are viable and scalable, meeting both current and future needs.

Recently, it was made abundantly clear to me that the State of Texas was, indeed, "watching" Corpus Christi. However, other than the low-interest loans that must be repaid, it seems "watching' is all they are willing to do at this time. If this project were so important for the State, what we really needed was leadership and financial participation that would have benefited Coastal Bend families and the state for generations.

Other Council members have made a point to suggest that, because we couldn't get this done, it will harm projects in other areas of the state considering desalination. I say it's just the opposite. They can learn from our experience.

A group of approximately 15 people developed this solution about 10 years ago. The committee was made up of industry representatives, economic developers, consultants, and city staff, not the ratepayers who would ultimately be writing the checks. Once on the desal path, smart projects like Aquifer Storage and Recovery, groundwater, and water reuse fell by the wayside.

It's like that old saying, “if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” This Inner Harbor hammer has been controversial from the start. Even our Mayor, the greatest proponent of this billion-dollar investment today, questioned the cost to citizens when she was on the campaign trail in 2020.

While this project’s runaway costs derailed it, desalination is a good option. In fact, I was the one who brought the Nueces River Authority Harbor Island Plant forward to our City Manager. In the next couple of weeks, the Council will have the opportunity to secure the Coastal Bend’s long-term water future, should we vote favorably to reserve our share of that water. While Island is long-term, I have also been working on the shorter-term Evangeline Aquifer groundwater, which is a good project at 25 MGD. This is a simple process but complex in that there are key steps to be followed. Just like oil and gas deposits, the law states that landowners own the water, and they have the right to sell those rights.

The stewardship of the Evangeline Aquifer water is under the jurisdiction of the San Patricio County Groundwater Conservation District (SPCGCD). This is the agency that approves a transfer permit and oversees the water use and the health of the aquifer. And it’s not just one and done. Where established, groundwater districts throughout the State have ongoing oversight, monitoring, and enforcement responsibilities.

Recently, in a meeting with legislators and the Governor’s staff, I shared these and other projects that would increase our available water. The projects included the purchase of an additional 7 MGD of water rights, wastewater reuse, and an innovative water concept proposed by the Chair of the Texas Railroad Commission. It was great because the staff made a point of saying that most cities aren’t as fortunate as Corpus Christi, as we have so many options.

That’s what I want our citizens, businesses, and prospective businesses to take away. The Inner Harbor vote on September 2 has no impact on Corpus Christi’s water situation today. We are not immediately running out of water. The water wells in Nueces County are a lifeline right now but can only be used until 2028. Given the urgency, we must stay focused on providing additional water resources for the Coastal Bend quickly.

I believe we’re setting sail in a new direction guided by fiscal responsibility, multiple reliable water sources, and smart partnerships. Thirty years ago, when we were faced with challenges to our regional air quality, industry stepped up to help, investing in plant upgrades to reduce emissions. I am

sure they are, again, looking to see how they can reduce the water burden. In addition, some group could put together a plan to utilize the Inner Harbor project permits. With all of these options, I am confident our State, our Council, and our community will come together to build a strong, resilient water strategy that will serve our region for years to come.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Vaughn

Carolyn Vaughn,
City of Corpus Christi At Large Council Member