

Interviewee: Dr. Ken Kramer (KK)
Host: Tonya Kleuskens (TK)
July 14, 2025

Lone Star Deep Dive Introduction: When we take the time to talk to one another, we often find connections that lead to a better understanding of our communities, our state, our nation, and ourselves.

Greetings and welcome to The Lone Star Deep Dive, a podcast that plunges into the intersection of passion, personality, and public policy. With in-depth conversations exploring issues that are sometimes behind the scenes and often controversial, but always of interest to those who live and work in our region.

The Lone Star Deep Dive is produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters of Amarillo and is guided by the League's nonpartisan advocacy for democracy in the Texas panhandle since 1950.

And now let's take a dive.

TK: Welcome to the Lone Star Deep Dive. I'm your host, Tonya Kleuskens.

As a follow-up to the conversations that we have had during the Texas 89th Legislative Session, we are offering a series of legislative reviews. Some of the folks we talked to you have heard before, and a few will be new. But today, we are talking to Dr. Ken Kramer.

Dr. Kramer is a writer and Texas water policy specialist who currently serves as the public representative on the Region H Water Planning Group, which conducts water supply planning for the 15-county area that includes Houston. He is also a representative on the stakeholder committees for environmental flows for the Brazos, Trinity, and San Jacinto River Basins, as well as Galveston Bay. In addition, he serves as the treasurer for the Texas Water Foundation Board.

Please see our show notes from Episode 7 and 24 for a full bio on Dr. Kramer.

Thank you, Dr. Kramer, for being here and welcome. We sure appreciate you returning to talk to us about this big water infrastructure bill.

KK: Thank you for the opportunity to do this.

TK: You're welcome. Whenever you're ready. Please tell us all about this legislation funding and all the things that we need to know in Texas about the changes to expect and what might be different.

KK: Well, first, a little bit of... background and historical context. Many people may already be aware of this, but in the 1950s, Texas experienced what has been known as the historic drought of record, the worst drought in Texas history for much of the state in recorded time. Now, a few areas have had worse droughts, at least during short periods of time since the 1950s, but the historic drought record of the 1950s is still the underpinning for state water supply planning and really has directed much of our thinking at the state level about what we need to do to secure our water supplies well into the future.

In the 1950s, after the drought record, the Texas Water Development Board was established by the legislature and given the task of providing not only planning but financial assistance to local governments who needed loan money to finance water supply projects. And later, the portfolio of the Water Development Board was expanded to include wastewater projects and flood control projects in their funding mechanisms. Over the years, the Water Development Board has been authorized by the legislature and the voters to loan significant amounts of money to local governments for these various types of water projects. In recent years, the demand, if you will, from local governments for state financial assistance for water projects has begun to dramatically exceed the amount of funding available from the state to help finance those projects. And so, in 2023, the legislature approved sending to the voters a proposed constitutional amendment that would allow a one-time \$1 billion infusion of money from the Water Development Board to finance additional water projects, primarily water supply projects. That proposed constitutional amendment was approved by the voters in November of 2023, and the Texas Water Development Board has been providing loans, in some cases grants, from the Texas Water Fund for projects since that time, in addition to the other pots of money, if you will, they have available for financing different types of water projects, including flood control projects. Well,

in the last two years, since the legislature met in 2023, there's been increasing public concern and concern with local officials and state officials about the tremendous water infrastructure funding needs of the state and its various cities and communities across the state. In fact, although estimates vary, it's been estimated by the Texas 2036 organization, based upon input from various sources, that we have a potential need in Texas over the next 50 years, about \$153 billion for water supply projects and wastewater projects, including fixing deteriorating infrastructure, which includes leaky pipelines in cities, water mains that break, and things of that nature. In addition, the recent adoption of a new state flood control plan estimates another potentially \$50 billion just for flood control projects across the state to meet various types of local flooding issues, which, of course, we've had dramatic experience within the Hill Country in recent days. So, there are some tremendous amounts of money that are considered to be necessary over the next 50 years or so to meet our various water infrastructure needs.

As a result of that, a number of legislators, including especially Senator Charles Berry from Lubbock, over the past two years have studied this problem and come up with proposed solutions. And one of the solutions basically, was incorporated into Senate Bill 7 and House Joint Resolution 7 this past session. HAR 7 is the proposed constitutional amendment that would allocate on a dedicated basis, not just a one-time infusion of \$1 billion for water projects, but actually \$1 billion a year over the next at least 20 years for our projects that would receive state financial assistance from the Water Development Board. That proposed a constitutional amendment will go before the voters in November of this year as Proposition 4. And Proposition 4 has to be approved by the voters in November, then it will take effect within the next two years. That means that over the next 20-year period, we would have an additional \$20 billion that the Water Development Board could provide and give financial assistance to local government water projects.

Senate Bill 7 is the companion bill to House Joint Resolution 7. It is what the legislators refer to as "the enabling legislation for the proposed state constitutional amendment." And Senate Bill 7 lays out sort of how the water fund would be able to allocate the money that would be available from this \$1 billion a year dedicated funding. I should also point out that in addition to the \$1 billion a year dedicated funding that the legislature has proposed to the voters, the legislature also appropriated another one-time allocation of

money of about \$2.5 billion for the Water Board to provide financial assistance to projects.

Now, I should qualify at the one-time \$2.5 billion actually included a certain amount of money out of the \$1 billion that was allocated two years ago, because all that money has not been spent yet. But there will be a significant amount of money available to the Water Development Board to fund various projects.

Now, one of the very important things about Senate Bill 7 is that it broadened the categories, projects for which the money may be allocated out of the Texas Water Fund. For example, it extended the funds that originally in the Texas Water Fund was just for water supply projects. and was somewhat restricted. But Senate Bill 7, which will go into effect if the voters approve Proposition 4, would allow the Water Development Board to use part of the money from the Texas Water Fund for agricultural water conservation or wastewater projects in economically distressed areas of the state, low-income areas, and also would allow money to be used for the flood infrastructure funding needs of the state, as well as for funding the projects that are called for in the state water supply plan. So, it dramatically broadens the types of projects and the types of solutions for water problems that can be financed out of the Texas Water Fund. That's a significant aspect of the legislation and one that I think is pretty universally approved by local governments and people who are active on water policy issues.

One of the controversies about the additional funding early in the legislative session was a concern that some of the proponents of the legislation were pushing for a certain reintroduction of the idea of creating a statewide water grid. In other words, a statewide water pipeline system that would move water all around the state. including potentially groundwater, but also potentially water from East Texas to West Texas and from out of state into Texas. Now that is still, if you will, a pipe dream of some legislators. But to be candid, the amount of money that's been allocated by the legislature or proposed to the voters to be allocated, at least 20 years, is nowhere near enough money to finance something as grandiose as a state water grid, which in my opinion is a good thing because we have some very significant water project needs, especially in reducing water loss in existing municipal water systems. And that should be, in my opinion, the first priority for the use of this money.

Plus, the need to really revamp our deteriorating wastewater treatment capacity and address flooding issues and other projects of that type. I am personally happy that what the legislature has done will not fund a safe water grid, which I think would be an unrealistic and potentially problematic expenditure of funds for water. This is a much more realistic approach. It will not solve all our problems in the water realm, but it is the most dramatic step that the legislature has taken thus far in decades to address water financing needs, and I think there's more than adequate evidence to point out the need for this funding. So, I hope that people will take the opportunity to inform themselves about the proposed Constitutional Amendment, Proposition 4, support the amendment, and encourage their neighbors and their local elected officials to support as well.

Now, as a person who's spent many years of my career working to protect the environment, I know that some of the infrastructure projects that are proposed may have some negative – or potentially negative – environmental consequences, and I certainly hope that these projects will be carried out in a way that protects the environment and I also feel that there's a need for the state to step up and do more for environmental protection, including protecting in-stream flows and freshwater inflows to our state estuaries, but we have to recognize that there are really critical water infrastructure needs as our population, and that we really need to take care of the deteriorating wastewater infrastructure we already have.

So on balance, I think Proposition 4 is a good piece of legislation, and that Senate Bill 7, while it's not perfect from my perspective, does move the ball forward in a very reasonable way to allow us to address some of the most pressing water challenges that we have now, and will have in the near future. Look at this legislation in that context.

TK: Yes, as it turns out, I do have one question. When can we expect the Proposition 4 to be on the ballot?

KK: It'll be on the ballot this November along with several other proposed constitutional amendments.

TK: All right. Well, we'll keep talking about that, and we'll talk about the environmental aspects as things move along. But I certainly want to thank

you so much for sharing your time with us today and educating us about this important water legislation. Thank you again, Dr. Kramer.

Thanks for listening to the Lone Star Deep Dive. This podcast has been made possible by members of the League of Women Voters of Amarillo, a nonpartisan nonprofit all-volunteer voting rights advocacy network that works hard to secure democracy in the Texas panhandle. All are welcome to join today at www.alwv.clubexpress.com. This podcast is hosted by Tonya Kleuskens and produced by Victoria Wilkinson. Our theme music was composed by Ryan Clark of Spirit of Space.

Thanks for taking this deep dive with us, exploring issues and policies that impact our lives in the Lone Star State. Again, this has been the Lone Star Deep Dive Podcast. Remember to subscribe, rate, and review us on Spotify, Apple, and Google Podcasts. And tell your friends. Thanks for listening.