

To Be or Not To Be a Golf Course in Wimberley?

Joni Seaton James Charles
Department of Finance and Economics
Texas State University, San Marcos, TX



Part I – First Impressions

Answer the questions below after you take a look at a map of Wimberley, Texas (go to <http://www.visitwimberley.com/mapsLocal/map.shtml> or use a resource like Google Maps at <https://www.google.com/maps>). The first question asks you to think about the town you live in while the second asks you about the town of Wimberley.

Questions

1. What are features of the city/town you are living in that make it an attractive place for you to live, go to school, or work in? What are some of the drawbacks? Explain why.
2. General observations are like first impressions. Based on the map you looked at, what are your first impressions of Wimberley and the area surrounding it? Or, how would you describe Wimberley to someone who was considering moving there to live based just on the map?



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Part II – A Closer Look

The Texas Hill Country village of Wimberley is located about an hour outside of Austin, Texas, and close to a variety of attractions in San Marcos and New Braunfels.

“However, as attractive as Wimberley’s centralized location to other attractions is, the village itself is the main reason tourists flock here. Wimberley is one of the most scenic communities in all of Texas, which makes for plenty of sightseeing opportunities for visitors. Additionally, despite its ‘village’ status, Wimberley offers a variety of shops which would be hard to match anywhere.” (Wise n.d.)

Wimberley offers a variety of cottages, bed and breakfasts, cabins and hotels where visitors can stay. Some offer multiple cabins and are conveniently situated just a few minutes off the square. Other sites provide a wonderful location for weddings, family reunions, or other special events and offer spa services in addition to B&B-style suites. Still others include activities like horseback riding, fishing, and swimming.

“Live music, great theater, fine lodging and dining, quality golf and miniature golf courses, nature trails, tubing, and even a spectacular zipline high above the Wimberley Valley help make Wimberley, Texas, a great place to visit. The warm, small-town atmosphere and the friendly people also make it a great place to live. Either way, the beautiful view of rivers and hills make Wimberley a memorable place to be.” (Hallowell n.d.)

Wimberley: Census Data (AdkorRealty n.d.)

Located in Hays County, Texas

Zip code: 78676

Population in July 2007: 5,442.

Median resident age: 45.6 years

Males: 2,566 (47.2%)

Texas median age: 32.3 years

Females: 2,876 (52.8%)

Estimated per capita income in 2009: \$40,638

	Wimberley (2000)	Wimberley (2009)	Texas (2009)
Estimated median household income:	\$46,042	\$70,829	\$48,259
Estimated median house or condo value:	\$137,000	\$227,681	\$125,800

Mean prices in 2009:

- All housing units: \$313,764
- Detached houses: \$327,871
- Townhouses or other attached units: \$617,574
- Mobile homes: \$120,837
- Occupied boats, RVs, vans, etc.: \$52,935

Questions

1. Do you have anything to add to or change about your impressions of Wimberley after reading the information provided above?
2. Some of the activities to which visitors are attracted are water dependent, some are not. Which ones are? Which ones are not? How would you measure their value to the town? How should the town measure their value?

Sources

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Part III – Wimberley’s Natural Resources

A good portion of the Hill Country, including western Hays County, draws its water from the Trinity Aquifer. An aquifer is a vast underground limestone-encased cavern of stored water. With ever-increasing pumping from this underground source of water due to economic development and increased water use, the Trinity has been dropping steadily. This aquifer mining, in turn, is sapping area streams and springs. Jacob’s Well (shown in Figure 1) is a spring that forms the headwaters for Cypress Creek, a source of flow for Wimberley’s legendary Blue Hole. Water from Jacob’s Well flows into Cypress Creek, which runs through downtown Wimberley and provides inflows to the Blanco River several miles downstream. (Cypress Creek Project n.d.)



Figure 1. “Cypress Creek and Jacob's Well” by Mike Rastiello, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hellamike81/12722963054/>, CC BY-NC 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>)

Despite having survived the drought of the 1950s, the spring has gone dry several times over the past dozen years. In particular, during the dry conditions of July 2000, Jacob’s Well ceased to flow for the first time in recorded history, degrading fish, wildlife, and water quality (Cypress Creek Project n.d.).

A developer that has owned property in the vicinity of the spring for about a decade wants permission to pump more underground water from the Trinity aquifer, the same one that feeds Jacob’s Well, for a growing subdivision and a new golf course. But an environmental group and the local watershed association says more pumping could dry up the spring, thus robbing Cypress Creek, a tributary of the Blanco River, of water. (Price 2013)

A regulatory board decided in a 3–2 vote to allow the developer to have a permit to pump as much as 160 million gallons as part of its plan to construct a golf course adjacent to new homes to be built on a subdivision just north of Wimberley. (Price 2013)

Questions

1. What are some of the current challenges to the natural resources that make Wimberley attractive?
2. Why would the developer choose to apply for a permit to pump water from the underground aquifer given the nature of Wimberley’s challenges to its water supply?

3. What are the implications of present versus future benefits and costs? What are the distributional effects of the granted permit?
4. Who are the major stakeholders?
5. How are the different stakeholders likely to view the present benefits and costs of building the golf course versus future benefits and costs?
6. How would one represent this tradeoff between future and present benefits and costs?
7. Why is it important to maintain groundwater quality and quantity? What role did the regulatory authority play?

Sources

Cypress Creek Project. (n.d.). Retrieved July 31, 2014, from https://wiki.epa.gov/watershed2/index.php/Cypress_Creek_Project.

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Part IV – Growing Pains?

“The Cypress Creek watershed is under increasing demands from a variety of sources. Hays County is listed as the 31st fastest growing county in the United States” (Cypress Creek Project n.d.).

“Between 1980 and 2012, the county’s population more than quadrupled, from 41,000 to 169,000” (Wilder 2013).

“Projections show that the county’s population could grow from 97,589 in 2000 to 509,876 in 2040. Such rapid growth over the Trinity Aquifer is already straining groundwater resources” (Cypress Creek Project n.d.).

“The mostly rural portion of the county west of I-35, in which the town of Wimberley lies, could triple again by 2060, according to population estimates” (Wilder 2013).

“The watershed and adjacent aquifer recharge and contributing zones of the lower Trinity Aquifer are particularly susceptible to numerous nonpoint source pollutants from development, septic systems, spray and subsurface effluent irrigation systems, fertilizer applications, and more direct public health threats from leaking petroleum storage tanks ...” (Miller 2013).

“Future development will increase opportunities for water quality impairments for pathogens, nutrients, sedimentation/siltation, organic enrichment and depressed oxygen levels, habitat alterations, and biological impairments” (Cypress Creek Project n.d.).

The subdivision in which the golf course would sit currently has about 1,000 homes, though it could build as many as 1,800 more. The president of the development association which wishes to pump water from the aquifer believes that the new course would be essential: “Property values are dependent on that amenity to keep them up,” he said. “It’s a golf course community. We want to have something that encourages a healthy, active lifestyle” (Price 2013).

But a different viewpoint has been expressed by the president of the local watershed association who counters that if Jacob’s Well dries up, it could have dire economic consequences for Wimberley and its quaint collection of shops, “chock-full of collectibles, vintage clothes and scented candles, and for its most famous swimming hole—Blue Hole—strung along Cypress Creek” (Price 2013).

Sources

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Part V – The Testimony*

“Absolutely,” said Irania Mothey, Executive Director of the Collaborative Partnership Alliance. “That’s right,” agreed Asel Funder, Executive Director of the Watershed Association. “We believe that if you supplied water (to the subdivision), Jacob’s well will stop flowing. Irania added, “With increased development in this area, we’re concerned about the future of water supplies here. We need to protect the Trinity aquifer, which feeds Jacob’s Well, from developers, and which could even affect the Edwards Aquifer, which feeds Barton Springs in Austin. This issue is not going to go away! We’ve tried and tried to get the permit given to the developer by Mr. Fowling and his board to be revoked, but they won’t budge! You’re our only hope, your Honor!”

Mr. Norris Fowling, the regional regulatory agency’s representative, felt it necessary to defend the watershed board’s decision. “We voted 3–2 in favor of granting Business Partners the permit to pump as much as 160 million gallons to build a long-planned golf course and additional houses in a nearby subdivision. Irania and her group and the watershed association were late filing their request to protest the permit, albeit someone in our organization gave them the wrong date,” he said. “Their attempts to argue the merits of the water district board’s decision to grant an operating permit to Business Partners are improper. In any case, we carefully considered the case put forward by the developer and we feel that they have made every effort to be good stewards of the land, your Honor.”

“This is true,” said Roger Mulcamp, the lead developer. “The groundwater is meant to irrigate the proposed golf course only until enough treated effluent can be collected from new homes to feed the course. The permit grants far less water than is usually required by golf courses which we own and we plan to use only drought-tolerant plants around the course. We have already built approximately 1000 homes, and we could build as many as 1800 more. This new golf course that we hope to irrigate with this groundwater is essential to the subdivision’s identity. Further, property values are dependent on that amenity to keep them up. After all, it *is* a golf course community. We want to have something that encourages a healthy, active lifestyle.”

* This account is a fictionalized reconstruction; the named individuals do not exist, but they do express viewpoints voiced by others at the time of the hearing. Cf. “Jacob’s Well becomes vortex for development fight,” *Austin American-Statesman* April 12, 2013, <http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/local/jacobs-well-becomes-vortex-for-development-fight/nXLKw/>.

Part VI – Stakeholder Positions

Stakeholder 1 – Environmentalist/Neighborhood Association-Alliance

Irania Mothey sat in the hallway on the uncomfortable wooden-slatted bench so often found in city government buildings. The seat wasn't the only thing making her uncomfortable. She had stayed up all night trying to summarize the sentiments of the 20 member Collaborative Partnership Alliance, a nonprofit environmental group which advocated for the protection and preservation of the region's natural resources and its aquatic and plant life, some of which were endangered species. She didn't mind. She was the Alliance's Executive Director and she knew that she had to be vocal and proactive to represent a diverse constituency, from the small shop owner to the local chapter of the National Wildlife Federation. She knew the battles she had fought to make people aware of the threat and pressures that development was bringing to the region's groundwater and surface water supply. Her organization was well-funded and well-supported by residents of nearby communities, many of whom owned ranches held and handed down by generations of family members. She was going to have to rely on her staunchest allies, Asel Funder, the Executive Director of the Watershed Association, and Edgar Highlight, its President, to bring the results from the most recent survey and research study they had conducted.

The door opens and the city clerk calls you and the other stakeholders into the council chambers.

Stakeholder 2 – The Developers

Huddled at the end of the hallway, near the city council chambers, were Roger Mulcamp and Ergot Hay, president and vice president of Business Partners. Their company was the leading developer in the area, which had owned property in the area for approximately a decade and was building attractive, upscale subdivisions for many of the upwardly-mobile families moving into the area. They had driven to Wimberley from nearby Seguin, where they had already built three new successful developments, and they had been waiting for the opportune time to repeat their success in Wimberley.

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Stakeholder 3 – Regulatory Agency/Governmental Authority

Norris Fowling had stepped outside of city hall since it was a smoke-free zone, but he could be seen pacing back and forth as he smoked a cigarette. He looked a little worried. He represented the Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District, a regional regulatory agency, which monitored the pumping of groundwater in the region. He and his agency had been under a lot of pressure lately, with increased water use due to population growth in the region, recent years of record drought and longstanding Texas preferences for minimalist state regulations. Attitudes seemed to be changing and the state's main regulatory agency, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the state legislature had recently debated setting up ground rules for a new groundwater conservation district in Western Travis County, which encompassed parts of South Austin, Southwest Austin and Western Travis County and another in Comal County. He knew that environmental groups and neighborhood associations looked upon his agency with suspicion, but he really was trying to do the right thing.

The door opens and the city clerk calls you and the other stakeholders into the council chambers.

Stakeholder 4 – City Council

Stakeholders are before the Wimberley City Council asking to have the permit revoked. The Wimberley City Council is also hearing testimony from the developer. The council has to decide whether the board's decision should be revoked or not and what is in the best interest of the city of Wimberley

What decision should the city council make?