

Titan's 'Martha's Farm' Drill Site: A Model for Urban Gas Drilling



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The 40-plus acres of lush, bucolic pastureland in North Arlington known as “Martha’s Farm” was once a spot of serenity tucked into the middle of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. It is not uncommon to drive by this pastoral spot of edenic beauty, owned by Martha and Ronnie Martin, and see horses frolicking in lush pastures, or wildlife of varying sorts intermingling in a peaceful coexistence.

But by the time neighbors and other interested individuals descended upon Arlington City Hall to consider the merits of drilling gas wells on Martha’s Farm, the atmosphere was anything but peaceful, and unlike the animals, human coexistence didn’t seem possible. You see, Martha’s Farm is surrounded by single family residences, hundreds of them, and nice ones at that. Consequently, rancor reigned as neighbors opposed neighbors, drillers opposed drillers, and acrimony filled the air as Arlington continued its contentious discussion of urban gas drilling.

When everything was said and done, Titan Operating, LLC prevailed as the driller of choice, yet feelings were hurt as few neighbors were swayed by the facts, and both sides became immune to the opinion of others, preferring instead to fortify their own side of the proverbial line in the sand. Some citizens who signed leases and took the money turned sour on urban drilling, opting instead to wait for expired leases and the opportunity to re-sign, for a price, of course. I’d venture to say that Titan’s management now has a better understanding of St. Theresa of Lisieux’s admonition to “be careful what you pray for, because you may get it.”

Mind you that all of this took place at the initial Special Use Permit phase of this project, with no drilling permit yet approved by the Arlington City Council. Fast forward months later, and while the first drilling permit was subsequently approved, Titan’s management seemed perplexed by a chain of events rife with raw emotion and spin, an obstinate City staff hell-bent on slowing down the drilling process in general, and battle-fatigued citizens.

Titan’s management, led by President and CEO Mark Schumacher, realized they had arrived at a crossroads. As Chris Hammack, Titan’s Vice-President of Operations puts it: “The battles fought against misinformation, exaggeration, and fear of the unknown left our company emotionally drained. We wallowed in the mire of anxiety and self-doubt for a very short period of time, then decided to step up to the plate and get to work.” Mr. Hammack claims that it was a conversation with Councilman Mel LeBlanc [yours truly] that inspired him

to take action. “Councilman LeBlanc’s observation that ‘a lot of people are going to be looking at this drill site, some of whom can’t wait to say ‘I told you so,’ made us realize that this was a golden opportunity to accomplish something beneficial not only for Titan, but for the urban gas drilling movement in general.”

And get to work they did. Titan has created a drill site that reflects promises made to the citizens of Arlington and that will be viewed by Industry as a model to be emulated for urban drilling, in my opinion. The themes embraced by Titan include compactness, disguise, and aesthetics, without compromising functionality and efficiency. The initial 6-acre pad site was reduced to less than 2 acres, hidden from street-view by an 8-foot masonry wall along Cooper Street. Titan chose an Acme brick product for the imposing wall, locally produced and interspersed with support columns made of native stone from a quarry in Mineral Wells. The rest of the enclosure consists of wrought iron fencing, also 8 feet high, with the same native stone columns inserted to provide support.

The “tightness” of this drill site is made possible by use of a specialty drilling rig, the Helmerich & Payne Flex 4s, that eliminates some of the other equipment required by less sophisticated rigs. For example, when performing casing running operations, since the H&P rig has built in casing running tools, the rig crew can perform this operation with no need for additional personnel or additional component equipment, nor the space required by them. In addition, many drill sites must include additional space to enable trucks to turn around once inside the confines of the site. By installing a backup lane, trucks can back into the site, eliminating the need to turn around on site and significantly reducing the site’s square footage.

I can personally vouch for Titan’s sleight-of-hand regarding disguise, having received 5 or 6 phone calls from irritated constituents complaining about a new upscale residential housing project being built right in their midst, without having gone through the Planning & Zoning Commission and City Council for requisite approvals. These callers were so sure that they had been duped that I had to drive over and see for myself. Nope, I smugly proclaimed, that’s Titan’s version of a drill site.

Whereas the wall adds to the overall order and beauty of this site, it is the landscaping that maximizes the aesthetic theme. Designed and coordinated by Mycoskie Mennis Associates, Inc., a premier civil engineering, construction management, and landscape architecture firm in Arlington, all foliage is native to Texas, and includes Possumhaw Holly trees, Texas Red Buds, Live Oaks, and Yaupon Hollies, all situated on manicured sections of Bermuda grass. Mr. Cliff Mycoskie, a veteran of urban drilling skirmishes, stated that “while Titan allocated more money to landscaping and irrigation than originally planned, not to mention the magnificent masonry wall, it is money well-spent. I cannot imagine anyone having any issues with this drill site.”

Those of us who have joined individuals such as Cliff Mycoskie in fighting the battles intrinsic to urban gas drilling have learned a lot in the process. Perhaps the most significant lesson is that the overriding problem with the urban gas drilling movement has nothing to do with hydraulic fracturing and water table contamination, nor with rampant air pollution, nor with our children contracting asthma or leukemia, which are the accusations of urban drilling

opponents. Instead, it is the inconvenience, aggravation, and overall nuisance that are the fundamental problems, and if we could resolve this situation, the naysayers may be forced to stay home.

I think Titan Operating, LLC has accomplished this feat, and I encourage anyone interested in urban gas drilling to get over to Arlington to see for themselves.



View of the rig at the Martha's Farm drill site in Arlington, Texas. Photo courtesy of Mel LeBlanc.