

*'They say this is where the least amount of residents live, and that's why they want to put the airport here. But this is where we make a living. This is our life.'*

*Alvina Hamann, Richland Community resident*

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# Trading furrows for a runway?



Rebecca McEntee/AA-S photos

Marvin and Alvina Hamann check the corn crop Thursday on their land northeast of Pflugerville, a farm that has belonged to their family since

the mid-1800s. The City of Pflugerville proposes to build an airport here, over some of the last working farmland in Travis County.

## Pflugerville airport plan threatens farm community

By ANGELA SHAH  
American-Statesman Staff

**NORTHEAST TRAVIS COUNTY** — Reverence fills Marvin Hamann's voice when he speaks of the acres he's farmed for nearly 50 years.

He seems embarrassed when his voice catches as he scans fields of milo, the brown tips bowing with the breeze.

He can't understand how, in just a few years, all this could be taken away.

"That's all I know," he said. "I love it. It's something to see, to watch it grow — golden. It's just a beautiful sight."

While Central Texas blossomed

into Silicon Hills, families such as the Hamanns continued to plow the rich black land northeast of Pflugerville, as they have for 130 years. But now, the City of Pflugerville may force them to sell to make way for an airport on this land, midway between the small airports in Georgetown and Taylor and Austin-Bergstrom International Airport to the south.

Pflugerville officials say the proposed \$41 million airport will attract businesses and increase the tax base of this small city, a bedroom community composed mostly of subdivisions and single-family homes. A site for the airport, which would cater to



Kermit Hees, 67, lets grandson Brandon Masi, 6, drive the tractor back from the fields Thursday, toward the house where Hees was born.

private jets, won't be chosen for two years, after fiscal and environmental studies have been done, city officials said.

The airport proposal currently

is favored by the city shows an outline of the new facility over the heart of the Richland

See Farmers, A7



# Farmers fear airport plans

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Community, also known as Cele. The farms of many longtime residents are overshadowed on the plan. Many of them intend to take part in a public hearing that Pflugerville officials will hold Wednesday, to voice concerns and to try to grasp what may happen in their lives.

The residents of the Richland Community say they feel their homes are endangered, as is a way of life in Travis County.

"They're some of the last producers," Travis County Extension Agent Brad Pierce said of the Richland Community families. "If we don't preserve it, the black lands and all those areas, eventually they won't exist."

Change is inevitable, city officials say.

"Of course, any time you do a development project, whether it be in the Richland Community or in downtown Pflugerville, you're going to have an impact on the people who live there," Pflugerville City Manager Steve Jones said. "That area's going to change whether there's an airport or not."

Hamann and his wife, Alvina, acknowledge that growth in Central Texas is inevitable. Still, they mourn for what will be lost. In their view, an airport would destroy this community, born of Central Texas' original settlers in the mid-1800s.

The Hamanns, both 76, have farmed their 130 acres for a half-century, surrounded by the 100-acre farms of friends and relatives. Their son, Maurice, has a homestead within eyeshot and continues the farming tradition.

"They say this is where the least amount of residents live, and that's why they want to put the airport here," Alvina Hamann said. "But this is where we make a living. This is our life."

Residents' mail comes addressed to the Manor post office. Their patchwork of family farms isn't marked on a map. What town there is consists of the Cele Store, the Richland Community Hall and the St. John Christian Church, each dating from the late 1800s. The church cemetery is filled with generations of family members now gone.

The settlers' descendants now farm the black lands, and the streets bear their family names: Pfluger, Weiss, Schmidt. Many still live in the sturdy wood-frame farmhouses built in the early 1900s.

Kermit Hees lives on Engerman Lane just a few miles from the

house where he was born. Hees and his wife, like so many local couples, met at the schoolhouse.

Hees, 67, still farms about 450 acres: his farm, his daddy's farm, his wife's family farm. Once he and his father worked side-by-side. Today, he amuses his grandson with tractor rides.

Hees is convinced an airport would destroy the Richland Community. In the current plan, the historic church stands at the end of a proposed runway. Many families would be forced to sell. And as for the farms not directly included?

"No one wants to live by an airport," Hees said.

"I don't know if progress can be stopped," he added. "But we're going to fight. We've been neighbors here for over 100 years. Our roots are here."

## Heading back home

Unlike some farming communities where the children grow up to disavow that life, the Richland Community's children come home.

Maurice Hamann, 38, sounds much like his father when he speaks of farming. After spending years pursuing other careers, Maurice Hamann returned to his boyhood home. For the past six years, he's plowed 170 acres just over the hill from his father.

"I farm this land, and I help him," he said. "My friends come out here from Austin just to sleep under the stars. Why would I want to leave it?"

Although Sheryl Serrano grew up in Austin, her mother's family, the Vorwerks, have called the Richland Community home since 1882. For the past 14 years, she and her husband, Arthur, have lived in a manufactured home on the property, planning and designing a dream house. The Serranos moved into their new home Friday. They are not sure how long they will be able to stay.

"This was supposed to be our place to raise the kids," she said. "But the Northeast section is where (Pflugerville) has to grow. We're in the sights of Pflugerville."

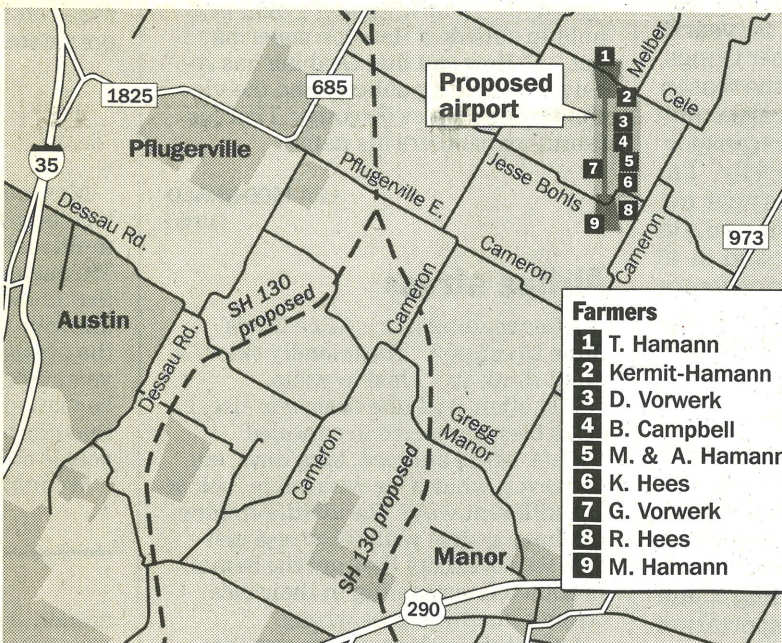
Indeed, suburbia is already nipping at the farming community's borders. In 10 years, Pflugerville's population has quadrupled to 16,000 people. A subdivision of manufactured homes and a strip mall anchored with an H-E-B have recently been built. The county is already broadening Kelly Lane to four lanes. Plans call for Weiss Lane to become a six-lane artery.



Liz Kuzzy and Marvin Hamann discuss points of concern during a meeting at St. John Christian Church in Northeast Travis County. People from the

farming Richland Community broke into small groups to discuss how an airport that Pflugerville has proposed could change their lives.

Rebecca McEntee/AA-S photos



Mary Coppinger/AA-S

"We would've held off building the house," Serrano said. "I don't know what's going to happen in the next year or two. We'll take it day by day, I guess."

## Not the first battle

To Marvin Hamann, turning the Richland Community from farmland into an airport is a monumental waste.

"How many people can I feed with this land for years and years?" he said. "They just want to

fill it with concrete.

"To help Pflugerville grow, is it worth killing a community?"

Maurice Hamann, who has become the community spokesman and main organizer, acknowledges that the farmers' view is at odds with Central Texas trends.

"We all understand growth, but this needs to be explained. This needs to be justified," he said.

Kirby Perry, with the Aviation Association of Central Texas, said



Christine Mills wears her opinion on her shirt as she speaks at the first meeting about the proposed airport, which Richland Community residents fear would cost them their homes.

hundreds of planes were displaced when Robert Mueller Municipal Airport and Austin Executive Airpark, an airport dedicated for general aviation and small aircraft, closed within weeks of each other.

"There is definitely a need for it," he said of the proposed Pflugerville facility. "There's a huge economic impact with it: high-tech aviation maintenance, avionics, . . . airplane sales and the support network that goes with that, such as restaurants and hotels."

For Richland Community residents, what's left mostly is to wait. The past does provide clues to what may happen. This isn't their first battle against an airport, against progress. Years before Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, Austin voters in 1987 had

approved building a new airport in nearby Manor.

"This plan places St. John Church about one mile from and in a direct line with a runway," according to a community history written a year later. "The airport and its accompanying industrial sprawl will probably devastate the church at its present site, the residential environment and the lifestyle of the entire Richland Community."

The 1988 account ended with a prayer and a statement of belief that current residents could draw from the faith and strength of the settlers who established this community: "We affirm that St. John Church is the people and is still alive."

The Richland Community is holding on to those words today. Again.