Brooke T. Paup, *Chairwoman*Bobby Janecka, *Commissioner*Catarina R. Gonzales, *Commissioner*Kelly Keel, *Executive Director* 



Garrett T. Arthur, Public Interest Counsel

#### TEXAS COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Protecting Texas by Reducing and Preventing Pollution

March 10, 2025

Laurie Gharis, Chief Clerk Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Office of the Chief Clerk (MC-105) P.O. Box 13087 Austin, Texas 78711-3087

RE: IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION BY NEW HORIZONS UTILITY, LLC AND OPTIN HOLDINGS 1 LLC FOR TPDES PERMIT NO. WQ0016257001 TCEQ DOCKET NO. 2025-0115-MWD

Dear Ms. Gharis:

Enclosed for filing is the Office of Public Interest Counsel's Response to Requests for Hearing and Request for Reconsideration in the above-entitled matter.

Sincerely,

Sheldon P. Wayne, Attorney

Assistant Public Interest Counsel

cc: Mailing List

#### **TCEO DOCKET NO. 2025-0115-MWD**

APPLICATION BY	§	<b>BEFORE THE</b>
NEW HORIZONS UTILITY, LLC	§	TEXAS COMMISSION ON
AND OPTIN HOLDINGS 1 LLC	§	ENVIRONMENTAL
FOR TPDES PERMIT NO.	§	QUALITY
WO0016257001	§	·

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INTEREST COUNSEL'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR HEARING AND REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION

#### To the Members of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality:

The Office of Public Interest Counsel (OPIC) at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) files this Response to Requests for Hearing and Request for Reconsideration in the above-captioned matter and respectfully submits the following.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Summary of Position

Before the Commission is an application by New Horizons Utility, LLC and Optin Holdings 1 LLC (Applicant) for a new Texas Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (TPDES) Permit No. WQ0016257001. The Commission received requests for a contested case hearing from the City of Georgetown and Beverly Wilkins. The Commission also received requests for a contested case hearing from the following entities that were later withdrawn: Jonah Water Special Utility District; Hillwood Enterprises, LP; M&RBFF, LLC; and OP III ATX GEORGETOWN 220, LP. For the reasons stated herein, OPIC respectfully recommends the Commission find that the City of Georgetown is an affected person in this matter and grant

its request for hearing. Additionally, OPIC recommends denial of the City of Georgetown's request for reconsideration.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Background of Facility

New Horizons Utility, LLC and OptiN Holdings 1 LLC have applied to TCEQ for new TPDES Permit No. WQ0016257001. As proposed, the draft permit authorizes the discharge of treated domestic wastewater (effluent) at a daily average flow not to exceed 1,340,000 gallons per day. The Applicant proposes to operate the New Horizons wastewater treatment plant (the Facility), which has not been constructed yet. The proposed location of the Facility is approximately half of a mile northeast of the intersection of County Road 107 and County Road 110, in Williamson County, 78626.

The Facility would be an activated sludge process plant operated in the complete mix mode. Treatment units in the Interim I phase would include a rotary drum screen, an influent equalization tank (EQ Tank), a membrane bioreactor (MBR) process train (which includes an anoxic zone, an aeration zone, and separate MBR Cassette tank). The Interim II phase would add another EQ Tank that is hydraulically tied to the first, two more MBR process trains, and a sludge dewatering press. The Final phase would add a parallel treatment building with identical treatment equipment and tankage as well as a second dewatering press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> OPIC notes that OP III ATX GEORGETOWN 220, LP also filed a request for reconsideration of the Executive Director's decision, however, this request was later withdrawn by the requestor.

The proposed discharge route is to an unnamed tributary of Huddleston Branch, then to Huddleston Branch, then to Mankins Branch, then to San Gabriel/North Fork San Gabriel River in Segment No. 1248 of the Brazos River Basin. The designated uses for Segment No. 1248 are primary contact recreation, public water supply, aquifer protection, and high aquatic life use.

#### C. Procedural Background

TCEQ received the application on November 22, 2022, and declared it administratively complete on February 14, 2023. The Applicant published the Notice of Receipt and Intent to Obtain a Water Quality Permit (NORI) in the *Williamson County Sun* on March 1, 2023. The ED completed the technical review of the application and prepared the proposed draft permit, which if approved, establishes the conditions under which the Facility must operate. The Applicant published the Notice of Application and Preliminary Decision in English in the *Williamson County Sun* on May 15, 2024 and in Spanish in *El Mundo* on May 23, 2024. The public comment period ended on June 24, 2024. The Executive Director's (ED) Response to Comments was mailed on December 3, 2024, and the deadline for submittal of a contested case hearing request or request for reconsideration was January 2, 2025.

#### II. APPLICABLE LAW

#### A. Requests for Hearing

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Applicant submitted an Alternative Language Exemption form on March 13, 2023. The Applicant noted that a newspaper or publication could not be found in any of the alternative languages in which notice is required. The Applicant further noted that the NORI was published in Spanish in the *Williamson County Sun*.

The application was filed after September 1, 2015, and is therefore subject to the procedural rules adopted pursuant to Senate Bill 709. Tex. S.B. 709, 84th Leg., R.S. (2015). Under Title 30, Texas Administrative Code (TAC) § 55.201(c), a hearing request by an affected person must be in writing, must be timely filed, may not be based on an issue raised solely in a public comment which has been withdrawn, and, for applications filed on or after September 1, 2015, must be based only on the affected person's timely comments.

Section 55.201(d) states that a hearing request must substantially comply with the following:

- (1) give the name, address, daytime telephone number, and, where possible, fax number of the person who files the request;
- (2) identify the requestor's personal justiciable interest affected by the application, including a brief, but specific, written statement explaining in plain language the requestor's location and distance relative to the proposed facility or activity that is the subject of the application and how and why the requestor believes he or she will be adversely affected by the proposed facility or activity in a manner not common to members of the general public;
- (3) request a contested case hearing;
- (4) list all relevant and material disputed issues of fact that were raised by the requestor during the public comment period and that are the basis of the hearing request. To facilitate the Commission's determination of the number and scope of issues to be referred to hearing, the requestor should, to the extent possible, specify any of the ED's responses to the requestor's comments that the requestor disputes, the factual basis of the dispute, and list any disputed issues of law; and
- (5) provide any other information specified in the public notice of application.

Under 30 TAC § 55.203(a), an "affected person" is one who has a personal justiciable interest related to a legal right, duty, privilege, power, or economic

interest affected by the application. An interest common to members of the general public does not qualify as a personal justiciable interest. As provided by § 55.203(b), governmental entities, including local governments and public agencies, with authority under state law over issues raised by the application may be considered affected persons. Relevant factors to be considered in determining whether a person is affected include:

- (1) whether the interest claimed is one protected by the law under which the application will be considered;
- (2) distance restrictions or other limitations imposed by law on the affected interest;
- (3) whether a reasonable relationship exists between the interest claimed and the activity regulated;
- (4) likely impact of the regulated activity on the health and safety of the person, and on the use of property of the person;
- (5) likely impact of the regulated activity on use of the impacted natural resource by the person;
- (6) for a hearing request on an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, whether the requestor timely submitted comments on the application that were not withdrawn; and
- (7) for governmental entities, their statutory authority over or interest in the issues relevant to the application.

30 TAC § 55.203(c).

Under § 55.203(d), to determine whether a person is an affected person for the purpose of granting a hearing request for an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, the Commission may also consider the following:

(1) the merits of the underlying application and supporting documentation in the administrative record, including whether the application meets the requirements for permit issuance;

- (2) the analysis and opinions of the executive director; and
- (3) any other expert reports, affidavits, opinions, or data submitted by the executive director, the applicant, or hearing requestor.

Under 30 TAC § 55.211(c)(2)(A)(ii), for an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, the Commission shall grant a hearing request made by an affected person if the request raises disputed issues of fact that were raised by the affected person during the comment period, that were not withdrawn by filing a withdrawal letter with the Chief Clerk prior to the filing of the ED's RTC, and that are relevant and material to the Commission's decision on the application.

Under § 55.211(c)(2)(B)–(D), the hearing request, to be granted, must also be timely filed with the Chief Clerk, pursuant to a right to hearing authorized by law, and comply with the requirements of § 55.201.

#### B. Requests for Reconsideration

Any person may file a request for reconsideration of the ED's decision under 30 TAC § 55.201(e). The request must be in writing and filed with the Chief Clerk no later than 30 days after the Chief Clerk mails the ED's decision and RTC. The request must expressly state that the person is requesting reconsideration of the ED's decision and give reasons why the decision should be reconsidered.

#### III. ANALYSIS OF HEARING REQUESTS

#### A. Whether the Requestors are Affected Persons

OPIC notes that the Commission received comments and requests for a contested case hearing from the following entities that were later withdrawn:

Jonah Water Special Utility District; Hillwood Enterprises, LP; M&RBFF, LLC; and OP III ATX GEORGETOWN 220, LP. As these requests have been withdrawn, OPIC did not include them in its analysis.

#### City of Georgetown

The City filed multiple timely hearing requests based on timely comments. The requests raise various concerns, including those related to violation of the State's regionalization policy; need for the Facility; adverse effects on water quality and health; creation of nuisance odors; inaccuracies in the application; and Applicant's compliance history. Each of these interests is protected by the law under which this application will be considered.

The City acknowledges that the Facility itself will not be located within its corporate limits and has been removed from the City's extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ). However, the City represents that the Facility's outfall is within 5,000 feet (approximately 0.95 miles) of Georgetown's city limits, is within three miles of the City's nearest wastewater treatment plant, and approximately one mile from the City's nearest wastewater main. Further, the proposed development to be served by the Facility will be located within the City's ETJ and its discharge route will flow through the ETJ.

The City takes specific issue with the Applicant's representation that the Facility will comply with the state's regionalization policy, and argues that it is uniquely positioned to offer evidence on this issue. The City represents that it has a wastewater collection system within 3 miles of the Facility's proposed service area, and is currently constructing additional collection infrastructure

less than 1 mile from the proposed service area. It further states that it has capacity to accept the Phase I and Phase II interim volumes of wastewater contemplated in the application, and is in the process of expansions sufficient to accept the Final Phase volume of 1.34 MGD of wastewater the Facility proposes to discharge.

Governmental entities with authority under state law over issues raised by the application may be considered affected persons. 30 TAC § 55.203(b). Furthermore, a relevant factor in determining whether a governmental entity qualifies as an affected person is its statutory authority over or interest in issues relevant to the application. 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(7).

Based on the information provided by the City, OPIC concludes that the City of Georgetown qualifies as an affected person. The City has demonstrated that it possesses a unique interest related to a legal right, duty, privilege, power, or economic interest affected by the application that is not common to the general public. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(a). The City highlights that it has a statutory interest in protecting the general health, safety, and welfare of persons residing inside its City limits and ETJ.<sup>3</sup> *See* Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 42.001. While the Facility itself is not located in the City or its ETJ, the development it will serve will be located in the ETJ, and the discharge will run through the ETJ. Additionally, OPIC notes that there are no distance restrictions applicable to this application. *See* 30

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The City also cites to numerous other statutes which demonstrate authority over or interest in issues relative to the application. Examples include Texas Water Code (TWC) § 7.351(a) (providing the City with authority to institute a civil suit for violations of various environmental statutes that occur within its jurisdiction); Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 217.042 (allowing the city to define and prohibit nuisance within, and up to 5,000 feet outside of, city limits).

TAC § 55.203(c)(2). Considering the substantial size of the 1.34 MGD Final Phase discharge and its location relative to city limits, OPIC is able to find that there is a reasonable likelihood that areas of the City and its ETJ may be affected by the regulated activity of Applicant. Thus, the City has demonstrated that it has an interest in issues relevant to the application. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(7). Finally, the City's claimed ability to provide wastewater treatment service is reasonably related to its concerns about the Facility, including the Facility's compliance with state regionalization policy. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(3). Therefore, OPIC concludes that the City of Georgetown has successfully demonstrated that it qualifies as an affected person.

#### Beverly Wilkins

The record indicates that while Ms. Wilkins filed multiple timely hearing requests, she did not file comments during the public comment period for this application. For the Commission to find that a hearing requestor qualifies as an affected person, that requestor must have timely submitted comments on the application. *See* Texas Water Code (TWC) § 5.115(a)(a-1)(2)(B); 30 TAC § 55.201(c). Therefore, OPIC cannot find that Beverly Wilkins qualifies as an affected person.

#### B. Which issues raised in the hearing requests are disputed

The City of Georgetown raised the following disputed issues:

- 1. Whether the proposed facility and draft permit comply with TCEQ's regionalization policy, including consideration of need under TWC § 26.0282;
- 2. Whether the application is substantially and materially complete and accurate;

- 3. Whether the draft permit impermissibly authorizes a discharge of pollutants to dry land rather than a watercourse (with a discernable bed and banks);
- 4. Whether the discharge route and receiving waters have been properly characterized and their uses correctly identified;
- 5. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of water quality and the existing uses of the receiving waters in accordance with the Texas Surface Water Quality Standards, including applicable antidegradation review requirements;
- 6. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of human health and wildlife, including endangered, threatened, or otherwise sensitive species;
- 7. Whether the draft permit complies with applicable requirements to abate and control nuisances, including nuisance odor;
- 8. Whether the Applicant has substantially complied with all applicable notice requirements;
- 9. Whether the draft permit contains adequate provisions to protect the use and enjoyment of property; and
- 10. Whether the draft permit should be denied or altered based on Applicant's compliance history.

#### C. Whether the dispute involves questions of fact or of law

If the Commission considers an issue to be one of fact, rather than one of law or policy, it is appropriate for referral to hearing if it meets all other applicable requirements. The issues raised here are issues of fact.

#### D. Whether the issues were raised during the public comment period

Issues No. 1-10 in Section III.B. were specifically raised by the City of Georgetown during the public comment period.

# E. Whether the hearing requests are based on issues raised solely in a withdrawn public comment

The City of Georgetown did not withdraw its public comments in this matter. Therefore, the City of Georgetown's hearing requests are not based on issues raised in withdrawn public comments.

# F. Whether the issues are relevant and material to the decision on the application

The hearing requests raised issues that are relevant and material to the Commission's decision under the requirements of 30 TAC §§ 55.201(d)(4)(B) and 55.211(c)(2)(A)(ii). To refer an issue to the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH), the Commission must find that the issue is relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny the permit. Relevant and material issues are those governed by the substantive law under which the permit is to be issued. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248-51 (1986).

#### Regionalization and Need

The City is concerned that the proposed Facility would not comply with Texas' Regionalization Policy. Under TWC § 26.081(a), it is "state policy to encourage and promote the development and use of regional and area-wide waste collection, treatment, and disposal systems to prevent pollution and maintain and enhance state water quality." Further, "in considering the issuance...of a permit to discharge waste, the commission may deny or alter the terms of the proposed permit...based on consideration of need, including the expected volume and quality of the influent and the availability of existing or proposed areawide or regional waste collection, treatment, and disposal systems not

designated as such by commission order pursuant to provisions of this subchapter." TWC § 26.0282. Therefore, Issue no. 1 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision on the application.

#### Completeness and Accuracy of the Application

The City is concerned that the application is inaccurate and/or incomplete. It specifically questions whether the application accurately identifies the location of the outfall and discharge route, and notes that the application fails to identify a Facility operator. TCEQ rules require that if an applicant becomes aware that it did not submit required facts or submitted incorrect information in a permit application, the applicant is required to promptly submit the needed facts and information. *See* 30 TAC § 305.125(19). Whether the application contains all required information is a disputed question of fact. Therefore, Issue no. 2 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

#### Suitability of the Discharge Route

The City is concerned that the proposed discharge route has been improperly characterized in the application and will not function properly, explaining that the discharge is to dry land instead of a discernable watercourse. This concern appears to be based on the suitability and functioning of the discharge route. Proper functioning of a discharge route as an operational feature of a wastewater treatment plant may be addressed under 30 TAC § 309.12, which contains requirements related to site selection in order to minimize possible contamination of water in the state. Therefore, Issue nos. 3 and 4 are relevant

and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and are appropriate for referral to SOAH.

## <u>Water Quality, Protection of Existing Uses, Antidegradation Review, Human Health, and Animal Life</u>

The City has concerns about the discharge's effects on water quality and resultant effects on human health, and animal life—including endangered, threatened, rare, and sensitive species. The Commission is responsible for the protection of water quality under TWC Chapter 26 and 30 TAC Chapters 307 and 309. The Texas Surface Water Quality Standards (Standards) in Chapter 307 require that the proposed permit "maintain the quality of water in the state consistent with public health and enjoyment, propagation and protection of terrestrial and aquatic life, operation of existing industries, and economic development of the state." 30 TAC § 307.1. According to § 307.6(b)(4) of the Standards, "Water in the state must be maintained to preclude adverse toxic effects on aquatic life, terrestrial life, livestock, or domestic animals, resulting from contact, consumption of aquatic organisms, consumption of water, or any combination of the three." Moreover, "[s]urface waters must not be toxic to man from ingestion of water, consumption of aquatic organisms, or contact with the skin, or to terrestrial or aquatic life." 30 TAC § 307.4(d).

Additionally, TCEQ regulations designate criteria for antidegradation of water quality and protection of existing uses. Antidegradation reviews are governed by 30 TAC § 307.5, which establishes the Commission's antidegradation policy and contains provisions for implementation of the policy.

TCEQ's antidegradation policy requires that "existing uses and water quality sufficient to protect those existing uses must be maintained." 30 TAC § 307.5(b). Therefore, Issue nos. 5 and 6 are relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and are appropriate for referral to SOAH.

#### Nuisance and Odor

The City is concerned that the Facility will cause nuisance conditions, including those specifically related to odor. Odor is specifically addressed by 30 TAC § 309.13(e), which requires that nuisance odor be abated and controlled. Further, § 307.4 delineates general criteria that surface waters must meet, including aesthetic parameters which work, in part, to prevent nuisance conditions attributable to the Facility. Finally, one of the purposes of Chapter 309 is "to minimize the possibility of exposing the public to nuisance conditions." 30 TAC § 309.10. Therefore, Issue nos. 7 and 9 are relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and are appropriate for referral to SOAH.

#### Public Notice

The City is concerned that the public notice given by Applicant was deficient, noting that the Spanish language version of the Notice of Receipt of Application and Intent to Obtain Water Quality Permit was published in the *Williamson County Sun*—a primarily English language publication, rather than in a newspaper that is published primarily in Spanish. The Applicant is required by 30 TAC Chapter 39, Subchapter J to provide public notice of the application. Specific alternative language notice requirements are governed by 30 TAC

§ 39.426. Therefore, Issue no. 8 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

#### Compliance History

The City is concerned that the Applicant's compliance history has not been properly evaluated by the ED, noting that Applicant—through its affiliates and subsidiaries—operates 25 public utility systems in Texas, however the compliance histories of these related entities were not considered during application review.

Pursuant to 30 TAC § 60.1(a)(l)(A), TCEQ is required to utilize an applicant's compliance history when making decisions regarding a permit. Further, the Commission is required to utilize compliance history for five years prior to the date the permit application is received by the ED, and specific components must be included in this history. Additional rules regarding use of compliance history in making permitting decisions are found at 30 TAC § 60.3. Therefore, Issue no. 10 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

#### G. Maximum expected duration for the contested case hearing

Commission rule 30 TAC § 50.115(d) requires that any Commission order referring a case to SOAH specify the maximum expected duration of the hearing by stating a date by which the judge is expected to issue a proposal for decision. The rule further provides that, for applications filed on or after September 1, 2015, the administrative law judge must conclude the hearing and provide a proposal for decision by the 180th day after the first day of the preliminary

hearing, or a date specified by the Commission, whichever is earlier. 30 TAC § 50.115(d)(2). To assist the Commission in setting a date by which the judge is expected to issue a proposal for decision, and as required by 30 TAC § 55.209(e)(7), OPIC estimates that the maximum expected duration of a hearing on this Application would be 180 days from the first date of the preliminary hearing until the proposal for decision is issued.

#### IV. REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION<sup>4</sup>

The City timely submitted a request for reconsideration asserting that the Facility will not comply with state policy on regionalization and is not needed. The City also raises concerns regarding completeness and accuracy of the Application; protection of surface water quality; degradation of existing uses of receiving waters; impact on wildlife; creation of nuisance conditions, including odors; evaluation of Applicant's compliance history; and protection of health, safety, and welfare of the City's residents.

As discussed above, these issues are relevant and material to the decision on this application. OPIC is recommending a hearing and referral of issues which encompass the City's concerns expressed in its request for reconsideration. However, an evidentiary record would be necessary for OPIC to make a recommendation to the Commission as to whether this request should be granted on any of the grounds advanced by the City. As no such record currently

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> OPIC notes that OP III ATX GEORGETOWN 220, LP also filed a request for reconsideration of the Executive Director's decision, however, this request was later withdrawn by the requestor. As such, OPIC has not included analysis of this request.

exists, OPIC cannot recommend this request for reconsideration be granted at this time.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Having found that the City of Georgetown qualifies as an affected person in this matter, OPIC respectfully recommends the Commission grant its hearing request and refer Issue nos. 1-10 specified in Section III.B for a contested case hearing at SOAH with a maximum duration of 180 days. OPIC further recommends the Commission deny the pending request for reconsideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Garrett T. Arthur Public Interest Counsel

By: Sheldon P. Wayne

Assistant Public Interest Counsel

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#### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I hereby certify that on March 10, 2025, the Office of Public Interest Counsel's Response to Requests for Hearing and Request for Reconsideration was filed with the Chief Clerk of the TCEQ and a copy was served to all persons listed on the attached mailing list via Inter-Agency Mail, electronic mail, or by deposit in the U.S. Mail.

Sheldon P. Wayne

#### MAILING LIST NEW HORIZONS UTILITY, LLC AND OPTIN HOLDINGS 1 LLC TCEQ DOCKET NO. 2025-0115-MWD

### <u>FOR THE APPLICANT</u> via electronic mail:

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### <u>FOR THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</u> via electronic mail:

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# FOR ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION via electronic mail:

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### FOR THE CHIEF CLERK via eFiling:

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#### REQUESTER(S):

See attached list.

#### **REQUESTER(S)**

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