Bastrop County Judge Ronnie McDonald has had to go unarmed into the gunfight over a lignite strip mine proposed by international giant Alcoa. No matter how adamant the opposition to the mine east of Elgin, no matter how determined McDonald and the Commissioners Court are to fight Alcoa, the county can do little. Bastrop's fight with Alcoa is another exasperating example of the impotence of county government in Texas.

This page has commented regularly for years that the state Legislature needs to give counties some authority over land use. Counties lack the power to pass local ordinances, and the abuses born of that impotence, particularly in land use, are well-known. Colonias, poorly planned and served subdivisions, inappropriate industrial plants and the occasional strip mine are often products of a county government powerless to protect its residents.

Alcoa has not been shy about using its considerable power to overwhelm opposition to the proposed surface mine. The lignite coal will be used to produce electricity at Alcoa's Rockdale smelter, which has long been cited as a major polluter in Central Texas. The Railroad Commission is expected to vote on, and approve, Alcoa's request to mine lignite this week.

Bastrop officials believe Alcoa, the world's largest aluminum producer, will sue the county for the right to mine lignite under four county roads. The county has refused to move the roads to accommodate the mine, and a suit is not out of the question. But little Bastrop County, with its $17 million annual budget, would be seriously outgunned in a legal battle with Alcoa.

Alcoa has not handled opposition to the strip mine with a light hand. The message to McDonald was considered a threat because an extended lawsuit could wreck the county's budget. Alcoa was even tougher with residents contesting the mining application, demanding that members turn over Social Security numbers, driver's license numbers and criminal history records and insisting on the right to go onto opponents' land and enter their homes.

That is intimidation designed for one purpose: to silence the opposition. A Railroad Commission hearing examiner threw out most of those requests, but the company's aggressive stance has weakened opposition.

Alcoa likely will begin mining lignite at its proposed site sometime next year whether it wins the right to excavate under the county roads or not. The company hasn't made many friends during this long process, but local bitterness matters little when billions of dollars in coal are at stake.

It is certain that this confrontation would have been much different if counties had the right to set limits on land use and the authority to enforce them. It's a change that is needed, overdue and increasingly important to millions of Texans.