



A Vision for Natural Areas and Parks

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A VISION FOR NATURAL AREAS AND PARKS

Parks are worth real money. So are clean lakes and creeks, working farms and ranches, nature preserves and hike and bike trails. They all contribute to the quality of life and economic health of a thriving, vibrant community. Studies have consistently proven that people will pay higher real estate prices to live in a community that offers these amenities. And that this type of livable community attracts the very best businesses and jobs.

Arguably the most valuable real estate in the world is Central Park, but it will never be developed. Community and business leaders understand that New York's vitality depends on Central Park and others places like Riverside Park with its hike and bike trails along the Hudson River. When the city accepted the expansive design for Central Park in 1857, people scoffed at its wastefulness and underestimated its value. We are at such a pivotal time for our Central Texas community. We need a similar expansive vision to prepare us for the huge growth that our five counties are experiencing.



On a local perspective, Zilker Park sums up so much of what sets Austin apart from other metropolitan cities. With its beautiful 485 acres, incredible facilities including Barton Springs Pool and its central location, Zilker Park is the heart and soul of Austin. It was only through past visionary efforts that the park and its land was set aside and protected from development. By enhancing and expanding the vision of our past leaders and founders, we can ensure that future generations will have the opportunity to experience and appreciate such vital elements that make our area so unlike any other.

In the 1990s, Central Texas grew to 1.2 million people and 690,000 jobs. Our region is increasingly popular and that trend isn't expected to slow. In fact, experts estimate that in the next twenty years, our population will increase by another million. It is not our goal to encourage or discourage this growth. "The question, even in the face of much growth, is not how do we maintain our quality of life, but how do we improve upon it?"

(Neal Kocurek)

It is time to stop reacting to growth and sprawl after it has already happened. We shouldn't settle for parks, wildlife habitats and recreational areas that are really just the land that is left over after development. And we shouldn't be protecting creeks, rivers, and working ranches and farms after it is too expensive and difficult to do a good job. As Central Texas continues to grow, the development policies and decisions made will have important consequences for our quality of life, today and in the future. We must work together to accommodate this growth, while preserving and enhancing our quality of life and the unique heritage and natural beauty that makes this area great. This paper presents a vision for identifying and setting aside the most important open space lands in the five-county region Envision Central Texas (ECT) Region.

Now is the time to begin making this vision a reality.



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Neal Kocurek
Founding Chair
Envision Central Texas

WHAT WE NEED

As the population growth of Central Texas continues, so must our dedication to protecting our environment, natural resources, recreational areas and other important elements of our quality of life. That effort will ensure that Central Texas continues to thrive economically and offer the best quality of life to our citizens. Our vision calls for a green infrastructure as important to our future as power lines, wastewater treatment facilities and roads. This infrastructure prioritizes:

- Clean, clear and plentiful water
- Clean air
- Working farms and ranches
- Hiking and biking trails and other recreational areas
- Star-lit night skies
- Expanding and improving existing natural spaces
- Creating larger networks of connected and usable open space
- Conservation of our natural resources

Building and maintaining this green infrastructure will give us a competitive advantage as we develop Central Texas into a world-class community that continues to attract the best and the brightest. We propose county-by-county strategies that will help each part of the region make wise decisions and investments in the recreational and natural spaces they need.

Water Quality: The ever-increasing population will demand more of our precious water supplies. We must encourage development and conservation scenarios that will safeguard the good water quality that we presently enjoy while simultaneously preserving water quality for future generations. The sustainable, healthy growth of our communities depends on protection of the aquifers, surface waters, watersheds, wetlands, riparian areas and other sensitive groundwater areas. Conservation of our water quality and supplies will also be key for maintaining our wildlife and recreational opportunities. Fishers, tubers, boaters, kayakers, and the businesses that support them all depend on our plentiful, clean and flowing waters. Responsibly planned protection will help ensure our grandchildren's use and enjoyment of these treasures.

Clean Air: One major component to cleaning up the air in Central Texas is simple — people need to make shorter and fewer car trips. An important element of ECT's vision of the future calls for greater density in our existing urban areas so that its residents do not have the need – or desire – to commute for enjoyment and shopping. Carefully planned and plentiful open spaces and natural areas are essential in order to make this kind of urban density livable. Open spaces and recreational areas provide havens of escape from the frenetic rhythms of city living. People need a place to sit on a bench and read the paper, toss a ball with friends, jog, cycle, or play with their children without having to drive to a distant park. Greenways and trails can also connect our neighborhoods to each other and to shops, offices, libraries, and schools. It is exactly these kinds of green spaces that, for many, will make dense urban living not only livable, but *enviable*.



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“Ultimately ... residential development that is not balanced by business growth and maintenance of agricultural lands or open space will cause either increasing property taxes or declining levels of public services.”

American Farmland Trust

Natural Areas: Most people wholeheartedly agree that much of Central Texas’ attraction and beauty stems from its natural and open space areas. Riverfront parks, hiking, biking and walking trails that take advantage of the Hill Country, working farms and ranches, clear flowing rivers and fields of wildflowers are just a few of our region’s treasures. What many people do not realize, however, is the critical role these lands also play in our economic health and how imperative it is that we protect these lands from disappearing into development. After conducting numerous studies of the cost of community services, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) concludes that agricultural/ranch and open space lands generate between three to four times more in revenues for a county than they require in public service costs. AFT states “Ultimately ... residential development that is not balanced by business growth and maintenance of agricultural lands or open space will cause either increasing property taxes or declining levels of public services.” (AFT *Bandera and Hays.*)

Providing wildlife with corridors so that the animals can move between open spaces and other habitat areas is also a key element of our open space vision. Being able to migrate is essential to the health and well-being of our wildlife. Connectivity for wildlife will also aid in our efforts to conserve corridors of natural land along major rivers and creeks to protect water quality and supplies. Trails and bikeways can provide open space connectivity through use of existing right of ways that increase recreational and outdoor travel opportunities for the entire region.

PHASES AND FUNDING

Our vision calls for a 20-year plan with different phases and progressive funding. Now is the time for joining together to define our desires and begin the planning. Our vision will start with our generation and will belong to the future.

Methods of acquisition of open space land will be both voluntary and regulatory. Funding must be a mix of public and private efforts; we cannot expect to rely solely on public funds. We must provide incentives to land owners, developers and businesses to encourage responsible growth. Voluntary tools will include gifts and purchases of land or conservation agreements. Government officials must be encouraged to enact requirements that encompass flood plain regulations, slope regulations, and endangered species regulations.

The open space needs of our region over the next 20 years must be secured now. As daunting as this vision is, it will be much cheaper and more effective to build it using this cohesive and coordinated strategy, than to let it be built in fragments by a variety of interest groups pushing individual agendas. Our limited funding must be leveraged by planning ahead and investing wisely.

VALUE

We must stop considering our working farms and ranches and natural areas as interim land uses awaiting conversion to the “highest and best” use. Not only are these waters and lands precious to our area’s high quality of life and desirability, they are of great fiscal value to our community. Studies of the cost of community services studies over the past two decades have consistently shown that the public costs associates with new residential development *exceed the public revenues that accrue from it.* (Crompton) As the American Farmland Trust studies show, ranch, agricultural and open land are of great fiscal value to local communities because they contribute between three and four times the amount they pay in local tax revenues more than they receive back in services. A balance of land uses is needed to lessen overall infrastructures costs and supply revenue to pay for these services. (AFL Hays)

Further, distinguished economist from Texas A&M, Dr. John Crompton has proven that capitalizing park and open space lands results in increased property values of proximate land owners. Crompton’s studies show that public officials, developers and homeowners must apportion the opportunity costs of park and open space lands to achieve the maximum benefit to the community. Further, his evidence clearly indicates that preserving open space can be a less expensive alternative than development. A strategy of conserving parks and open space is not contrary to a community’s economic health, but rather it is an integral part of it.

CONCLUSION

Floating down the rivers, fishing in streams, catching tadpoles in creeks, boating with family and friends in lakes. Picnicking in the parks, bird watching at the nature preserve and enjoying the fruits of farmers’ markets. These are just some of the countless connections and deep ties Central Texans enjoy with our land. The experts predict the growth is inevitable, but we have the ability to envision, promote and support responsible development. Let’s join together and accept that responsibility for a future that accommodates growth while preserving our unique heritage and natural beauty that makes people want to call Central Texas home.

Our ECT committee for Open Space Funding is made up of people from all walks of life and all areas of Central Texas who are committed to making this vision a reality.

Our next steps are to:

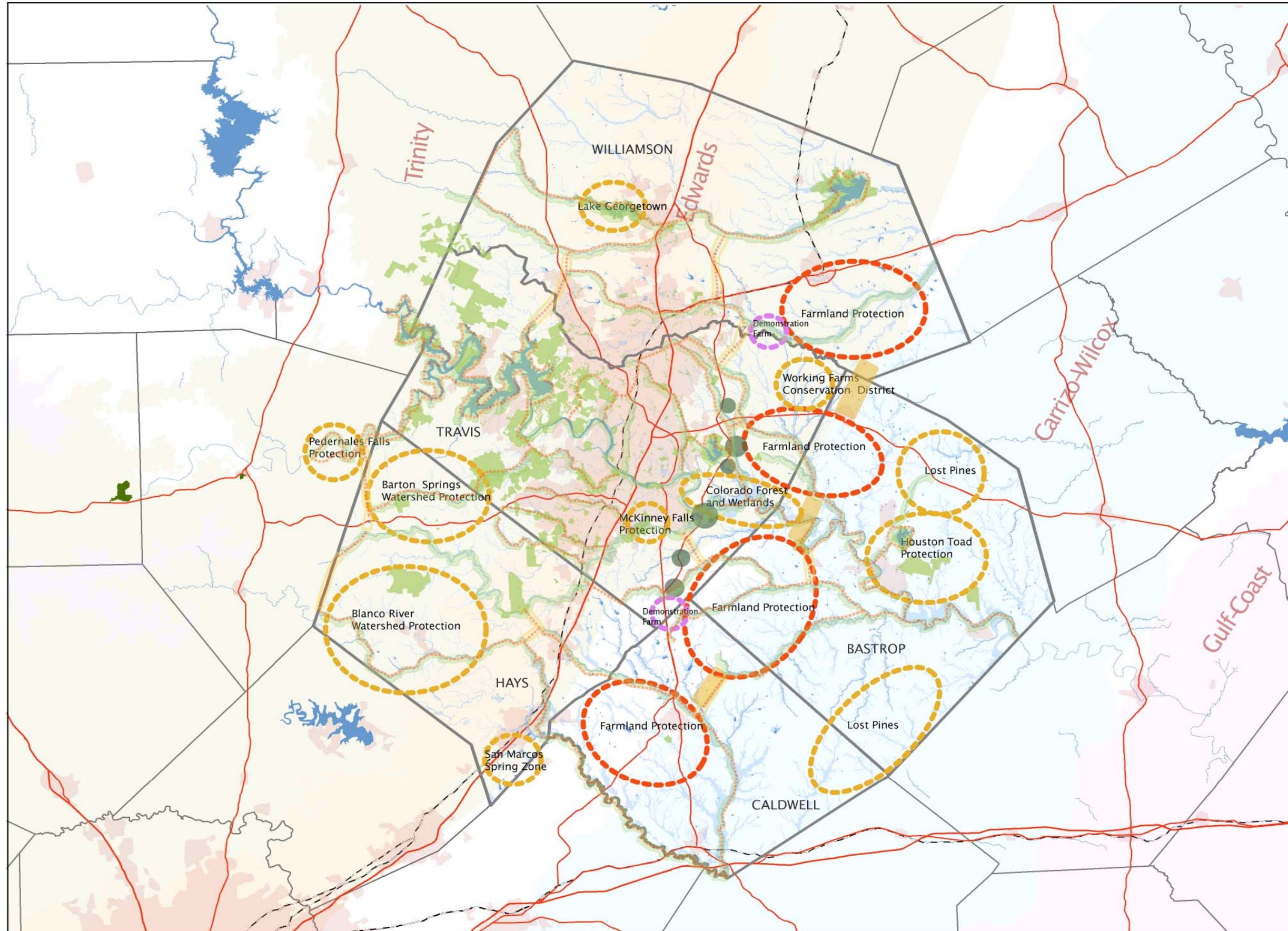
- Complete an inventory of all the future Open Space needs of the 5 county region.
- Synthesize this inventory into a detailed Green Infrastructure plan.
- Develop recommendations for responsible funding of this investment in our future.
- Support each community of Central Texas as it seeks the political will and funding to enact an open space plan.

For an appendix of funding sources, additional open space maps and other resources, visit the “Resources” page on ECT’s website at www.envisioncentraltexas.org.



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American Farmland Trust



Potential Central Texas Open Space Composite

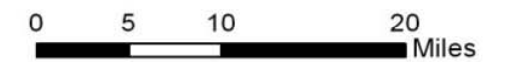
LEGEND

-  Conservation Areas
-  Farmland Protection
-  Demonstration Farm
-  Potential Green Sites Along SH 130
-  ECT Planning Area
-  Potential Trails
-  Potential Riparian Zones
-  100 year floodplains

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 2006
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Data Sources:
 Dr. Barbara Parmenter
 CAPCOG (www.capcog.org)
 City of Austin
 (<ftp://coageoid01.ci.austin.tx.us/>).
 TNRIS
 (<http://www.tnr.is.state.tx.us/>)





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10-2-06