



For Immediate Release

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**Investing in Natural Infrastructure is an Investment in Our Future
by Ben Eldredge, Vice President of Conservation, Cibolo Center for
Conservation**

Farmers and ranchers often acknowledge that “if you take care of the land, the land will take care of you.” This wisdom stands at odds with conventional development practices, which often lead to polluted streams, destructive flooding, and urban heat islands. The costly engineered solutions used in conventional development are not as effective as natural systems that filter pollutants, slow stormwater, and provide shade.

Natural infrastructure describes natural features and ecological systems that support human safety and enhance quality of life. It includes healthy watersheds - rich with native vegetation - that slow, filter, and sink stormwater into the ground. It is the aquifer that stores our region’s water, as well as the porous recharge features that convey those waters underground across the recharge zone. It is the vegetated streambanks that mitigate the destructive impacts of flooding, as well as the diverse plant communities that enhance the resilience of ecological systems that naturally support our well-being.

Put simply, natural infrastructure is extremely valuable infrastructure!

To help regional leaders and residents understand the value of this infrastructure, The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network recently released the [Hill Country Land, Water, Sky and Natural Infrastructure Plan](#). This document clearly illustrates the many benefits of natural infrastructure and leaves no doubt about the natural value that surrounds us.

The Natural Infrastructure Plan dispels the false notion that we must abandon natural features and replace them with hardscapes and other engineered solutions in order to build a suburban or urban environment.

In the Hill Country, we are seeing dense development encroaching upon the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone, covering recharge features with impervious roofs and pavement that reduce groundwater recharge and intensify flooding. But it doesn’t have to be like this. It is time to move beyond these short-sighted development strategies and instead utilize natural infrastructure in our built environments.

Fortunately, some Hill Country cities and counties have acknowledged the errors of conventional development practices and are implementing cost-efficient strategies to provide greater resilience and enhance quality of life in their communities.

Cities like Marble Falls, Johnson City, and Helotes have realized the value of Tree Preservation Ordinances. Trees are also highly effective natural infrastructure, great at mitigating both floods and the heat-island effect common in poorly developed areas.

To preserve aquifer recharge, the Edwards Aquifer Authority applies development rules that reduce negative impacts of development on recharge features. The City of Boerne - located in the Edwards Aquifer contributing zone - has followed their lead and implemented a similar ordinance.

Boerne has also implemented a Low Impact Development ordinance. This integrated stormwater strategy prescribes the use of green infrastructure - such as bioswales - to capture pollutants and litter that would otherwise flow into local waterways and the aquifer recharge zone.

Dark Sky ordinances have been embraced by many communities from Dripping Springs to Kerrville, where residents are preserving their awe-inspiring view of the stars while also enjoying the associated health benefits and cost savings of responsible outdoor lighting.

A growing number of these local examples can be found across the Hill Country and are outlined in the recent Hill Country Alliance guidebook [*Leading By Example: Ordinances and Tools for Growing Hill Country Communities.*](#)

Several counties have placed open space bonds on the ballot to help purchase land and enact conservation easements that will safeguard natural areas and aquifer recharge features for future generations. Kendall County recently passed a \$20 million bond focused on the protection of watersheds, recharge features, and other natural infrastructure that received 67% of the vote.

Beyond bond measures, open spaces can also be protected through city ordinances that require parkland dedication, the inclusion of greenway trails in thoroughfare plans, and aquifer recharge zone protections.

Some counties have exercised their authority to require environmental setbacks, floodway protection, and leveraged other strategies to protect natural infrastructure. Learn more about these approaches in the newly released [*Growth and Conservation in Texas: A Primer on County Tools and Paths Forward.*](#)

If we take care of the land, it will take care of us. So let's kick out the stops, adopt the best practices, change the laws, and do what's best for Texans young, old, and those yet to come.

About the Author:

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Photo Attachments:



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Peace After the Storm - Photo Courtesy of Christopher Keeran