



COUNTIES CAN CONSERVE

Conservation easements are a powerful tool.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS, ALSO REFERRED TO AS PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS (PDR'S), ARE A FLEXIBLE, COST-EFFECTIVE TOOL TRAVIS COUNTY CAN USE TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS FOR CONSERVING LAND FOR PUBLIC BENEFIT. A CONSERVATION EASEMENT IS A VOLUNTARY LEGAL AGREEMENT THAT ENSURES A PROPERTY WILL NOT BE DEVELOPED AND WILL BE MANAGED FOREVER IN A WAY WHERE CONSERVATION VALUES REMAIN INTACT.

Counties can leverage limited public dollars with federal, private and other local resources when conservation easement (CE) agreements are used with the voluntary cooperation of private landowners. Most importantly, when using this tool, the county is investing in the quality of life in Travis County and thereby increasing land values, supporting our tax base, and insuring future economic growth.

Key benefits to Travis County citizens through use of this land conservation tool include:

- Conserved lands help protect our drinking water and local economy.
- Land use goals can be achieved for water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat protection, buffers to parks, farmland and soil conservation, flood plain protection, etc.
- Public benefits can be secured at much less cost than purchasing land outright for public ownership, operation and maintenance.
- Conserved lands remain on the tax rolls and require less management costs.
- County funds are leveraged with federal and private matching grants.

- Properties surrounding conserved lands often rise in value.
- The sale or donation of conservation easements is voluntary on the part of the landowner.

Many types of county goals can be addressed with CE agreements. Protection of water resources and wildlife habitat are the most common uses, but permanent CE agreements are easily adaptable to create greenbelts, scenic corridors, educational venues and buffers zones around parks and nature preserves. In some cases, these conservation agreements can be used to complete or improve walking and biking trails.

Federal and state programs exist for counties that want to preserve rich soils and invest in sustainable food production and working ranches. Archeological, historical and cultural resources can also be protected for future generations. Through CE agreements, all of these land use goals are achieved at a much lower cost than buying the land, and the private landowner is still responsible for maintaining the land and paying the taxes.

For a local example, consider the conservation easement acquired on the 2,254-acre Dahlstrom Ranch near Buda, Texas. Together, the federal government, Hays County and City of Austin put \$10 million in to the agreement, while the Dahlstrom family donated \$12 million of the appraised development value. With an investment of \$4 million, Hays County achieved the protection of drinking water for 50,000 to 60,000 county residents and will have access to a 384-acre environmental education preserve. The 2,254-acre ranch becomes permanent green space in a rapidly urbanizing area of the county, and the pressure of additional run-off pollution is removed from a two-mile stretch of Onion Creek. The City of Austin achieved

additional protection for Barton Springs and the Edwards Aquifer. The federal government protected agricultural land and unique archeological resources. And Hays County citizens reaped all of these benefits.

There are many similar conservation values in both eastern and western Travis County that could be protected through the conservation easement funding proposed in the Travis County bond package. Every dollar for land conservation can be multiplied several times with other public and private funding.

The eastern creeks of Travis County – Wilbarger, Gilliland, Walnut and Onion Creeks – are still relatively healthy and flow through rich and beautiful farmland that is disappearing and becoming unavailable for locally grown food. This beautiful pastoral land is rapidly being developed into new suburban neighborhoods, and State Highway 130 will further fuel development in this unincorporated area. The County needs to act now to establish the “green infrastructure” that will become the greenbelts, nature preserves, parks, trails and bike routes of the future for these neighborhoods.

On the Pedernales River, in far western Travis County, Hamilton’s Pool and Reimer’s Ranch Park form a foothold for the green infrastructure of the west, but the parks will be threatened if the water quality is changed by development upstream. There are many large tracts of ranch land still available on the Pedernales River that could remain undeveloped and preserve the water and wildlife for the region.

Travis County is a leader in conservation planning. With a bill passed by the 2011 legislature, the County can now avail itself to using the tool of CE agreements to further its conservation goals and provide many ecological and economic benefits to Travis County citizens.

“We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

– ALDO LEOPOLD, A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC





THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF LAND CONSERVATION

CENTRAL TEXANS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVING LAND FOR PUBLIC BENEFITS THAT INCLUDE PROTECTION OF WATER QUALITY AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLY, WORKING AGRICULTURAL LAND, WILDLIFE HABITAT, GREEN CORRIDORS, SCENIC BEAUTY, HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES, AND OUR QUALITY OF LIFE.

There are also economic aspects for conserving open spaces and working farms and ranches that underscore the benefits to local government budgets and to tax paying citizens. One must look beyond the immediate issue of public expense and instead focus on the investment in a community's well being.

American Farmland Trust Studies.

In the early 1980s, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) began to analyze the fiscal contribution of existing local land uses – residential, industrial/commercial and working farms and ranches and rural open lands. Their studies were based on the costs of public services in relation to the public revenues generated from each land use.

The AFT reports, entitled the Cost of Community Services, are from more than 95 communities across the United States, including three counties in Texas. The findings are instructive for communities, counties and regions planning for growth.

• It is important for citizens and local leaders to understand the relationships between residential and commercial growth, agricultural land use, conservation

and their community's bottom line.

- It is a false claim that residential development will lower property taxes by increasing the tax base. To provide public services to residential development costs the public an average of **\$1.16 for every \$1** raised through residential tax revenue. **In other words, the cost of public services is greater than the revenue received from residential land use.**
- Farms, ranches and open lands generate more public revenues than they receive back in public services. The AFT study shows that **for every tax dollar paid on working lands, the cost of public services averages 36¢.**
- The AFT study in Hays County concluded that residential land use required \$1.26 in public services for every tax dollar received, while farm and agricultural lands cost the public an average of 33¢ per tax dollar.
- Agricultural land is converted to development more commonly than any other land use. (Texas leads the nation in loss of prime agricultural farmland to development.)
- Communities pay a high price for unplanned growth and it is up to communities to balance goals such as maintaining affordable housing, creating jobs and conserving land.

“Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest. It asserts the new premise that if he fails to do so, his neighbors must ultimately pay the bill.”

– ALDO LEOPOLD, 1934

Leveraging Public Dollars on Conservation Lands

A portion of the proposed Travis county bond package represents a significant contribution to land conservation, not only by expanding the County park system, but also for the first time ever to purchase development rights (PDR's) from willing landowners through the use of conservation easements.

The proposed proposition for land conservation will allow Travis County to work in partnership with private landowners and other public agencies to protect water resources, working farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, scenic views, and to help manage growth.

It is important for citizens to understand how public dollars can be leveraged. One way is through a commonly used federal program called the Farm & Ranch Protection Program (FRPP), an initiative of the Natural Resource Conservation Service within the Dept. of Agriculture.

Following is an example of how the FRPP program works. The key elements are:

- a willing landowner of a working farm or ranch of more than 250 acres;
- a determination of conservation values on that property;
- a federally-approved appraisal to determine the value of development rights; and
- a local funding partner.

The federal program (FRPP) will then fund one-half the cost of the development rights, the landowner voluntarily donates one-fourth, and the local funding source (in this case the county), puts in one-fourth of the total.

So, for a qualifying property, assuming the appraisal was \$2 million, the FRPP would put in \$1 million, the landowner would donate \$500K, and the county and/or other local partners would contribute \$500K. It's important to note, the landowner maintains ownership of the land, while the land stays productive and on the tax roles.

While FRPP has been used beneficially around this area (ex: Dahlstrom Ranch, Hays County) and is currently a federally funded program, it's also important to note that there are other partnership opportunities. Not all properties may qualify for FRPP funds, but there are some landowners who are willing to donate more than a quarter of the value, perhaps even 100 percent of the easement, in order to protect their family lands and heritage from development pressures. These landowners may simply be looking for a resource partner to pick up the other out-of-pocket costs of conserving their land.

In the end the leverage of tax payer monies for donated easements is an economical way to buy up the ecological services and benefits that will be so important to a growing population – clean water, clean air, local food sources, scenic beauty and a green landscape that is so much a part of our central Texas quality of life.