



COUNCIL COMMITTEE REPORT

COMMITTEE ON OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Date: September 28, 2016

Agenda Item #: 5

Agenda Item: Briefing from the Hill Country Alliance and discussion regarding opportunities for regional collaboration to protect Texas Hill Country resources.

Vote No vote was taken.

Sponsors/Department: Chair Pool/Watershed Protection Department

Presenters: Katherine Romans, Executive Director, Hill Country Alliance

Summary of Discussion

- Katherine Romans, Executive Director of the Hill Country Alliance introduced the topic and explained that the information presented stems from a 2015 report titled “Toward a Regional Plan for the Texas Hill Country,” which was produced by students from the UT School of Architecture for the Hill Country Alliance.
- The Hill Country Alliance (HCA) is a regional non-profit that operates throughout 17 counties that cover more than 11 million acres of central Texas. The long-term objective of the HCA is to preserve open spaces, water supply, water quality, and the unique character of the Texas Hill Country.
- In the 10 years the HCA has been in existence, the Hill Country region has grown very rapidly. The Hill Country is projected to double its population in the next 35 years. With that growth comes real change for Hill Country landscapes. Agricultural lands that capture and filter stormwater, serve as wildlife habitat, and provide scenic beauty are increasingly converted to suburban development.
- This growth also threatens water quality and quantity. There has been a 2000% increase in the number of wells in the Dripping Springs area from 2002 to 2012. As the number of wells increases, we will soon see real impacts on the aquifers and waters that supply Barton Springs and Onion Creek.
- If the region continues to develop as it has in the past, the HCA predicts an incredible consumption of land by the year 2050. Most of this development will take place outside of our incorporated cities and towns, where a lack of county authority means that little can be done to guide or regulate incompatible land uses.

- The report first examined case studies from other regions facing rapid growth, including New York City. In the 1990s, New York City bought development rights, incentivized conservation, and invested in rural communities to protect the watersheds that supply its drinking water. The result was a win-win—New York City was able to avoid the constructing a \$6 – \$10 billion water filtration plant and the rural communities have seen huge increases in the economic viability of their dairy industry.
- The students proposed to implement a Hill Country Endowment. This idea seeks to address the needs of the I-35 corridor’s needs as it grows, but to also supply technical and financial resources to the rural communities that steward the Hill Country’s natural resources.
- The endowment would be a regional collaboration across the rural-urban boundary, with the urban communities providing financial and planning support and the rural communities providing critical natural resources. Some existing examples of this sort of collaboration between government entities, nonprofits, and private landowners include the Balcones Canyonland Preserve, Austin’s Water Quality Protection Lands, and San Antonio’s Edward’s Aquifer Protection Program.
- The endowment would serve to scaffold the work of these programs by providing an ongoing revenue stream. It would support more than just land conservation, but also infrastructure upgrades, planning support, research, education, and outreach.
- Financing would come from a diversity of sources, including private businesses and foundations, local governments, and federal funds.
- The HCA is now soliciting support from cities such as Austin, San Antonio, and San Marcos. The HCA would appreciate support from City Council for this idea of regional collaboration. At the same time, the HCA is planning to convene rural community leaders several times over the next year to identify challenges and opportunities in these communities.
- Chair Pool suggested that the HCA present to the Environmental Commission, Water and Wastewater Commission, and Parks and Recreation Board. Chair Pool stated that this would be helpful to build towards a statement of support, and suggested that the HCA can return to give an update in the spring.

Speakers

None.

Direction

The Committee requests for HCA to return to give an update in the spring of 2017.

Recommendation

There was no recommendation to the full Council.