Recommendation for Action

File #: 21-2028, **Agenda Item #:** 3. 6/10/2021

Posting Language
Authorize negotiation and execution of an interlocal agreement with Texas A&M AgriLife Research to develop an updated Land Management Plan for the City's Water Quality Protection Lands program.

Lead Department
Austin Water.

Fiscal Note
Funding in the amount of $25,000 is available in the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Operating Budget of Austin Water. Funding for the remaining years of the agreement is contingent upon available funding in future budgets.

Prior Council Action:
December 12, 2001 - Adoption of WQPL Land Management Plan (Resolution #011212-80)
December 13, 2012 - Adoption of WQPL Land Management Plan Dec 13, 2012 (Resolution # 20121213-003).

For More Information:
Inquiries should be directed to the City Manager's Agenda Office at 512-974-2991 or AgendaOffice@austintexas.gov.

Council Committee, Boards and Commission Action:
June 2, 2021 - To be reviewed by the Water and Wastewater Commission.

Additional Backup Information:
Austin Water has managed the Water Quality Protection Lands (WQPL) since their origin in 1998. The WQPL began with the passage of $65 million in Utility Revenue Bonds to protect 15,000 acres of land that provide source water for Barton Springs. Additional general revenue bonds have since been passed which has seen the WQPL grow to their current 30,000(+) acres of land protected.

The WQPL protects land in fee simple and using conservation easements on private property. The fee simple lands are managed according to a Land Management Plan that helps direct their management with the most effective and protective methodologies according to ecological restoration strategies.

The land management practices used by the City's WQPL Program should be updated approximately once each decade to keep these practices in line with the most current science involving land management and ecological restoration, while taking into account the essential functioning of the unique karst landscape that feeds Barton Springs. The first Land Management Plan for the WQPL was approved by Council in 2001 and the second in 2012. Both were prepared by outside experts to stay up to date with the most current thinking on these issues and to avoid issues such as confirmation bias and group think which can occur in even the most professional organizations. Since that time, additional lands have been purchased and the scientific knowledge of land management for the protection of water quality and water quantity has progressed.

This action authorizes the negotiation and execution of an interlocal agreement with Texas A&M AgriLife

Research for a three-year term and a total amount not to exceed $120,000. Texas A&M AgriLife is well suited for this work as they have a long history of providing the most relevant cutting-edge research on the connection between land cover and water dynamics and providing land management recommendations relevant to this connection. Further, Texas A&M AgriLife is one of the largest public universities in the State of Texas and has a long history of leading edge research that focuses on land/water relationships and land management to improve high quality water yields.

This new Land Management Plan will work to capture the scientific literature updates into a comprehensive land management plan to guide the implementation of ecological restoration of these sensitive lands. In addition, it will include consideration of the Water Forward Plan, expected impacts from global climate change on land management and will provide additional documentation of current conditions and land treatments of the Water Quality Protection Lands.

Austin Water will return to the Water and Wastewater Commission and City Council to approve the Land Management Plan once this updating work is completed. This process will serve to publicly define the City's intention to manage these lands in a manner consistent with our responsibilities under the bonds issued for the purchase of these sensitive lands.

Strategic Outcome(s):

Health and Environment.