

Board/Commission Recommendation to Austin City Council:

WHEREAS, The Animal Advisory Commission is tasked to “promote collaboration between the City and interested parties relating to animal welfare in the city,” and

WHEREAS, Austin is home to the largest urban bat colony in America; and

WHEREAS, Natural bat habitat in caves has historically been filled or closed widespread across the Austin area, forcing bats to seek urban habitat, and

WHEREAS, Austin’s famous colony of Mexican free-tailed bats under the Congress Avenue bridge has been shown by economic studies to be worth tens of millions of dollars to the Austin economy; and

WHEREAS, Mexican free-tailed bats eat literally tons of insect pests every night, including mosquitoes, and play a major role in pollinating crops, thus providing valuable ecological services; and

WHEREAS, Our bat colony is changing due to the effects of climate change as well as Austin’s rapid growth and downtown activity; and

WHEREAS, Other large and growing colonies of Mexican free-tailed bats are appearing under other bridges in the Austin area; and

WHEREAS, With new road construction, and with the proper knowledge and advice, bridges can be designed to either safely accommodate bats or prevent them from roosting underneath them, therefor reducing human/bat conflict; and

WHEREAS, Bats are tested far more than other species for rabies and consequently are found to be the single most common carrier of rabies in Austin, and because of that, state law requires injured and dead bats to be closely monitored for this disease, even though bats very rarely ever infect humans with rabies; and

WHEREAS, State rabies requirements result in Austin’s Animal Protection Officers (APOs) prioritizing responding to rabies calls, including downed bat calls. Downed bat calls require little APO expertise or equipment, but take time away from APOs attending to stray, lost or injured animal calls; and

WHEREAS, In our Wildlands Conservation Lands, including the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, all of which are under the care of the Austin Water Utility, we have numerous caves that house different bat species, along with other endangered species that need monitoring and protection; and

WHEREAS, On September 13, 2022 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the proposed listing of the tricolor bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) as endangered under the U.S Endangered Species Act, which is a bat species found in caves in the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, as well as other caves around Austin; and

WHEREAS, Austin has already benefitted greatly from the expertise of qualified biologists hired by the City specifically to address specialty ecological issues such as stream ecology, native botany, toxic algae, ornithology, and entomology; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE AUSTIN ANIMAL ADVISORY COMMISSION:

We recommend that the City of Austin hire a qualified, full-time Chiropterologist (bat biologist) to work in the Wildlands Conservation Division of the Austin Water Utility. This biologist can take on the duties of City-wide rabies reports concerning bats, bat conservation, and recommendations for anticipating and solving City problems related to human/bat conflict. This would include restoring natural bat habitat across the Austin area; monitoring bat populations throughout the City; providing advice on infrastructure design within our ever-expanding transit system (and other construction) to either include or discourage bat habitation; identifying and designing ways to protect bat populations throughout the City; being available as an educational resource for bat conservation; partnering with and advising local bat rescue groups, and collecting data on the changes observed in the Mexican free-tailed bat colony under the Congress Avenue bridge to better understand what this colony needs to prosper in our changing urban environment.