

Public Comment on Item 3: Brackenridge Field Laboratory

October 20, 2026

To the Members of the Environmental Commission

Re: Item 3, October 21, 2026 agenda, proposed amendments to the City/UT Brackenridge Interlocal Agreement

Dear Commissioners,

My name is Meredith Lovelace. I live in Brentwood, I'm a Texas Master Naturalist, and for the past two years I've volunteered at UT's Brackenridge Field Laboratory, where I manage the herbarium. I'm writing as a private resident, not on behalf of the University.

I'm glad to see Munny finally saved. But I was surprised that the staff briefing for this item describes the 190 acres UT will keep without once mentioning the field lab, which takes up 81 of them.

BFL has been a research and teaching station since 1967. What makes it valuable is that it has stayed undeveloped. Almost sixty years of study on the same stretch of riverfront can't be picked up and moved somewhere else.

More than 700 plant species, 1,200 kinds of moths and butterflies, and 160 bird species have been recorded there, and we've found an orchid that hadn't been seen in the area in decades.

Research at BFL on parasitic phorid flies helped bring a non-pesticide control for invasive fire ants to Texas. The site also holds a student- and volunteer-run herbarium and one of the largest insect collections in the state.

The UT Regents voted in 2009 to keep the lab out of redevelopment, but that was a board vote, not a permanent protection. The tract map on slide 9 of the backup labels the land south of Lake Austin Boulevard as "Development Area" and doesn't show the lab at all.

A few other things in the briefing worry me. Setbacks for critical environmental features won't be decided until after a future review, but Council is scheduled to vote on November 19.

Impervious cover is capped at 75% across the whole 190 acres and can be shifted between areas. If the lab's open land counts toward that average, other parcels could build more because BFL stays green, with nothing in the agreement keeping it that way.

Cut and fill and construction on slopes would also stay unregulated.

I'd ask the Commission to recommend the following:

1. Show the field lab's acreage on the BDA exhibits and the regulating plan, and exclude it from development.
2. Finish the critical environmental features review, including what's documented at BFL, and make it public before Council votes.
3. If the lab's land counts toward the 75% impervious cover average, protect it permanently as open space.
4. Apply the City's current cut and fill and slope rules to the tract.
5. Bring BFL's leadership and faculty into the drafting of the regulating plan, and brief this Commission again when that plan is ready.
6. Since Item 3 is only a briefing, I hope two of you will sponsor a future agenda item so the Commission can make a formal recommendation before November 19.

Saving Munny shouldn't mean pushing development onto the one part of the tract whose value is scientific rather than financial.

If any of you would like to see the lab in person, I'd be happy to help set up a visit.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Meredith Lovelace [REDACTED] 78756

October 20, 2026

To the Members of the Environmental Commission

Regarding Item 3 on the October 21, 2026 agenda, the proposed amendments to the existing Interlocal Agreement between the City and the University of Texas.

Dear Commissioners,

My name is Dr. Elizabeth Bowman. I am a research scientist at the Brackenridge Field Laboratory where I have worked and conducted research since 2020. I am writing to the commission as a private resident, educator, and scientist, not on behalf of the University.

Brackenridge Field Laboratory (BFL) is host to 82-acres of diverse habitats that support hundreds of species of plants, insects, animals, and fungi. As a fungal ecologist, I have conducted numerous surveys of fungi and lichens across the property. Currently, I am working with undergraduate students to document these fungi and describe what are possibly new species. This past weekend an undergraduate student found the rare Texas Star (*Chorioactis geaster*), the state mushroom of Texas, on the property. This discovery illustrates the scientific value of BFL and the importance of preserving these habitats.

It's location within Austin makes it an invaluable resource for the university, citizens of Austin, and K-12 students to gain hands-on experience. BFL supports field-, greenhouse-, and lab-based research and education, while its experimental gardens, greenhouses, research spaces, and molecular laboratory provide essential resources for faculty and students across the university. Research at BFL also contributes to long-term ecological records that help us understand biodiversity and environmental change over time, especially in the context of urbanization.

I am concerned that the proposed amendments to the Brackenridge Development Agreement do not appear to provide explicit protection for BFL. In particular, the map of the Brackenridge Tract on slide 9 of the "City of Austin and University of Texas Brackenridge Interlocal Agreement Presentation" designates the area that is currently BFL as a "Development Area". Without clear, binding protections in the agreement, this designation raises concerns about the long-term future of the laboratory, its research activities, and the ecological resources it supports.

I would please like to recommend the following for the commission:

1. Explicitly identify and map BFL. Clearly delineate the entire 82-acre BFL property, including its research habitats, experimental areas, greenhouses, and research facilities.
2. Exclude BFL from development. Designate the BFL property as a protected research and conservation area, excluded from development, impervious-cover transfers, and infrastructure projects that would compromise its ecological function or research activities. This protection should be expressly incorporated into the binding agreement rather than deferred to the subsequent regulating plan.
3. Complete and publicly release a comprehensive environmental assessment before approval.
4. Establish protective buffers around BFL. Evaluate and establish appropriate buffers between BFL and any future development. These should account for the potential effects of stormwater runoff, changes in drainage and groundwater, noise, and construction disturbance.
5. Prohibit the transfer of development intensity into sensitive areas.
6. Require construction-phase environmental protections and long-term monitoring. Establish baseline environmental conditions and require monitoring before, during, and after construction, with publicly available results and corrective actions if adverse impacts occur.
7. Recognize BFL as a long-term scientific and education resource. Include language recognizing the importance of preserving the continuity of research, teaching, specimen collection, and long-term ecological records at BFL. Ensure that development and infrastructure decisions do not compromise access to research habitats, experimental areas, laboratory facilities, or the Colorado River. Consult with BFL researchers and relevant ecological experts when evaluating proposals that could affect the site.

I respectfully urge the Commission to recommend that BFL be explicitly identified and protected in the amended agreement before it is forwarded for final approval by City Council and the UT Board of Regents. BFL has a long and rich history that is deeply woven into Austin's identity and community. Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to visit BFL and learn about its rich past and the science that is ongoing.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth Bowman, PhD

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Elizabeth Bowman.