Austin

MEMORANDUM

To: Austin Parks and Recreation Board

Through: Jesús Aguirre, Director, Austin Parks and Recreation

From: Robynne Heymans, Planner Principal, Austin Parks and Recreation

Date: November 20, 2026

Subject: **Update on the Lower Colorado River Waterfront Restoration and Access Plan (WRAP)**

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update to the Parks and Recreation Board on the Lower Colorado River Watershed Restoration and Access Plan (WRAP). Led by Great Springs Project in collaboration with a group of non-profit, agency, and community partners, work on the study has been underway since November 2025, and has involved dialogue with multiple city agencies, including Austin Parks and Recreation.

Project Description and Background

Great Springs Project (GSP) is a 501c3 non-profit based in Austin that promotes healthy landscapes and connected communities in the Edwards Aquifer region. The organization works to create a greenway of protected lands between Austin and San Antonio over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone; to protect and enhance sensitive riparian corridors throughout the region; and to establish a network of spring-to-spring trails, linking the four iconic springs of Central Texas: Barton Springs, San Marcos Springs, Comal Springs, and San Antonio Springs. Together, these initiatives unify existing local efforts to address the most critical water, land, wildlife, and public health challenges facing the Central Texas region.

GSP's project area encompasses significant reaches of the Colorado River system, including both Town Lake and the Butler Trail, and the Lower Colorado River corridor from Longhorn Dam to Webberville County Park near the Travis-Bastrop County Line (the "Lower Colorado River"). Numerous visioning efforts, including several led by City of Austin, have indicated a shared regional preference for access to the river, both in terms of park and trail access, and through water-based activities like canoeing, kayaking, and fishing. Meanwhile, conservation and enhancement of the riparian area and the river itself is

consistent with virtually every City of Austin and Travis County planning effort in recent memory.

In 2024, GSP partnered with The Trail Conservancy and Travis County Parks Foundation to successfully pursue funding from the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART grant program to develop for the WRAP. The premise of the study is to synthesize the region's shared priority for increased access to the lower Colorado River corridor, with a mutual objective to conserve, restore, and steward the river's ecological assets for present and future generations. The WRAP process has been intended to bring local and regional stakeholders together to articulate a vision for projects and programs that support healthy ecosystems and enable appropriate public access between the Longhorn Dam and the Travis County line to the east. The final study will recommend specific strategies for achieving these outcomes.

The planning process engaged a coalition of partners from throughout the region, including the City of Austin. The city assembled a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of staff identified who have jurisdiction over, or operational interest in, the parkland. TAG members have provided technical guidance, regulatory input, and operational considerations throughout the planning process. The TAG has included City of Austin staff from Austin Parks and Recreation, Austin Watershed Protection, Austin Transportation and Public Works, and Austin Water. TAG participation is advisory only and does not constitute formal project approval or permitting authority.

Context and Baselining

At the outset of the study, the WRAP evaluated a range of relevant plans, including the following city plans:

- Our Parks, Our Future (2019)
- Trevino Park Vision Plan (2020)
- City of Austin Urban Trails Plan (2023)
- Bolm District Park Vision Plan (2024)
- Rain to River (2026)

The WRAP aligns with, builds on, and in some cases, directly implements recommendations of these and other site-specific plans in the project area.

Additionally, the study evaluates the lower river corridor's environmental, physical, and social existing conditions. These considerations help establish the context within which the WRAP's recommendations are applicable. Topics considered at this stage include historic and contemporary streambank erosion; climate change issues related to heat and drought; ecological conditions related to wildlife and habitat; historic and future land uses; and tract-level demographic conditions.

Community Engagement

Because the future of the Lower Colorado River affects many different communities, organizations, and river users and encompasses many different perspectives, community

engagement was central to the WRAP process. The study's engagement program sought to build project awareness with the public, establish relationships and buy-in from the community, and gather ideas from residents, stakeholders, and river users about how the corridor should evolve over time.

Engagement occurred through two main channels: targeted meetings with a diverse array of stakeholders, and engagement with the public through pop-up events, a website, and an online survey. Highlights include:

- Two public stakeholder meetings
- 147 online survey responses
- 4 pop-ups at community events with over 1,400 attendees

Vision and Guiding Principles:
Throughout the research and engagement phases of the project, access, community, ecological health, and collaborative stewardship repeatedly rose to the top of the community's concerns for the present and hopes for the future. The project team developed the following vision statement to synthetize these ideas, and structure the study's outcomes:

"The watershed is a thriving ecosystem for wildlife and a place where people can find community. Through land stewardship and collaboration, a network of land and water trails connects the city to nature and enhances and expands access to a critical shared resource, the Lower Colorado River."

The vision statement is refined into four guiding principles that shape and organize the study's recommendations. The guiding principles are:

- **Many Ways to the River:** Enable the community to access, learn about, and connect with the river corridor in ways that reflect a variety of perspectives on recreation, mobility, and education.
- **Rooted in the River:** Cultivate a sense of community and belonging through outdoor experiences in the river area.
- **Wild By Design:** Enhance the ecological health of the river corridor to the benefit of both human and non-human users.
- **Common Ground:** Model innovative ways of balancing land development and land stewardship in a sensitive, rapidly changing urban landscape.

Recommendations
The WRAP recommends a variety of actions, including discrete projects and expansive programs, to achieve the shared aspirations reflected in the vision statement and in accordance with the guiding principles. Recommendations are organized into strategies, which are distinct, tangible outcomes that can be achieved by implementing the recommended actions. The WRAP proposes 10 strategies, which are:

Strategy 1: Create a connected riverfront trail from Lady Bird Johnson Lake to Big Webberville Park that brings people close to the water, protects the river's natural beauty, and connects public and private lands.

Strategy 2: Improve river access and views through public infrastructure and private development projects.

Strategy 3: Establish a context-sensitive trail identity that offers a comfortable experience for everyone, and is appropriate for the different conditions in the river corridor.

Strategy 4: Embrace the dynamic nature of the river and its unique stories through educational programs and features.

Strategy 5: Partner with local schools, river organizations, and guides to amplify experiences along the corridor with a year-round calendar of recreation, stewardship, and education events.

Strategy 6: Protect, restore, and reconnect the corridor's most valuable habitats, including prairie, riparian woodland, wetland, and aquatic, and sequence restoration ahead of new public access.

Strategy 7: Improve water quality and slow bank loss by designing drainage, development, and shoreline treatments to work with the river's natural movement rather than against it.

Strategy 8: Coordinate with new development along the river to secure open space, limit the intensity of use in sensitive reaches, and keep growth from outpacing the corridor's ecological capacity.

Strategy 9: Assemble a continuous corridor of protected land along the river corridor using targeted acquisition, easements, and leases across public and private property.

Strategy 10: Give private landowners the guidance, incentives, and volunteer support to care for the riverbank they own, and recognize those who do it well.

Within each strategy, recommendations are divided into two categories: corridor-wide guidance and key projects. Corridor-wide guidance provides river-wide direction for future investment, with more detail than a strategy. This allows for flexibility while implementing the plan when new opportunities arise that align with recommendations in the plan, but were not known during the planning process. Most strategies include 5-7 corridor-wide recommendations, and overall, the WRAP includes approximately 75 corridor-wide recommendations.

Key projects identify specific locations for targeted improvements and partners involved. These were discussed with partners in depth to ensure their feasibility and suitability for the plan. Strategies and actions may also be accompanied by case studies or precedents

that add additional context and detail for highest priority actions. These examples may be local to Texas or inspiration from other regions. Most strategies include 3-5 key project recommendations, and overall, the WRAP includes approximately 45 corridor-wide recommendations.

Implementation

The study concludes with materials to support implementation of the corridor-wide and key project recommendations. The WRAP provides a methodology for evaluating, prioritizing, and implementing actions based on discrete factors: the cost, complexity, duration, community benefit, and transformational impact of each recommendation. It then evaluates all of the key projects to suggest priority initiatives to work on following completion of the study.

The WRAP also includes a comprehensive section on funding approaches for supporting implementation. This includes a list of strategic state and federal grant programs, organized by their applicability to different classes of WRAP recommendations; a summary of municipal bond and exaction powers that could be relevant for WRAP implementation; and reflections on the different roles that philanthropic organizations can play in delivering and programming the restoration and access concepts described in the study.

This section concludes with an outlined framework for long-term governance and partnership coordination. The project partners will continue developing the governance framework to ensure that the regional collaboration fostered by the WRAP continues and grows long after the study is completed.

Next Steps

Project partners will continue reviewing a draft of the document through the end of 2026. Once agency and stakeholder review are completed, GSP and its collaborators will share the completed draft with the appropriate bodies at City of Austin and Travis County.

Should you have any questions, please contact Robynne Heymans, Principal Planner, Land Use and Acquisitions Division, Austin Parks and Recreation at Robynne.Heymans@austintexas.gov.

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