

**T**he **April 2019** guest speaker was Kevin Thuesen, Environmental Conservation Program Manager for the City of Austin's Water Quality Protection Lands (WQPL) Program. Mr. Thuesen made the case that the City of Austin's model land conservation program was established only after a period of strong citizen advocacy for aquifer protection. Mr. Thuesen shared the history of how the WQPL Program came to be. In 1992, when plans for a huge development along Barton Creek threatened Barton Springs, citizens flooded a City Council meeting in protest. After an all-night hearing, the City Council voted to reject the developer's plans. To further protect the springs, through a citizen initiative, a strong water quality ordinance, known as the SOS Ordinance (Save Our Springs) was approved by two-thirds of Austin voters. In response, the Texas Legislature passed legislation that grandfathered development projects which had preliminary plans in place at the time the SOS rules became law; this allowed many projects to proceed under the laxer rules in place at the time of the SOS Ordinance's adoption. After years of controversy, in 1998 Austin voters approved a bond for the City to buy land in the watersheds that feed Barton Springs. Voters approved \$65 million for the purchase of land and development rights in the Barton Springs watersheds.

As of 2018, approximately \$238 million in bonds have been approved to purchase lands to protect Austin's water quality. The WQPL Program now oversees 28,611 acres. Some of these lands are owned outright, but 62% of the lands are in conservation easements with private ownership; that is, Austin has purchased the landowners' development rights. Lands have been purchased in Travis and Hays Counties because groundwater movement is heterogeneous and local watersheds contribute differentially to the springs. For example, the program has established that 33% of the water at the springs originates from the Onion Creek watershed, 20 miles away. Furthermore, that water is reaching the springs in two to three days. While private owners manage the land on conservation easements, the City manages the lands it owns. The objective is to maintain water quality by maintaining the natural function of the lands. The management program

includes low-impact ecological restoration, including brush removal, seeding, and burning to restore lands to a grassland/savannah ecosystem. Although not an objective, this work has increased biodiversity on City properties. On the Onion Creek property, which represents 0.7% of Hays County acreage, 49% of the plant species that occur in the county are represented.

For more information about this program, volunteer opportunities, and low-impact trails, [click here](#). You can also learn more about the Austin Water Quality Protection Lands [here](#). To learn more about the history of the SOS Ordinance and the Water Quality Protection Lands, watch The Wildlands, by Karen Kocher, [accessible here](#). You can also watch [WQPL's video here](#).