# **Great Springs Project Envisions a Network of Trails From Austin to San Antonio** Brendan Gibbons July 28, 2020

Twenty-seven years ago, Deborah Morin watched as the hills, streams, caves, and springs of the Hill Country outside of Austin were being gobbled up by construction.

At the time, Morin was serving on the board of the Hill Country Foundation, where she was involved with efforts to map the watershed for the Barton Springs portion of the Edwards Aquifer outside of Austin.

The vast majority of that land is in private hands, meaning the health of the aquifer and Barton Springs was mostly dependent upon the decisions of private landowners. In Morin’s view, government regulation alone wouldn’t protect these sensitive waterways or preserve the land for generations.

“It doesn’t matter how many laws, how many rules you have,” Morin told the *Rivard Report* earlier this month. “You have to buy it.”

Almost three decades later, Morin, a San Antonio native, is at the head of a nonprofit working to do just that, but on a much larger scale. She’s president of the board of the [Great Springs Project](https://greatspringsproject.org/), an initiative to preserve land and stitch together a network of hike and bike trails that will eventually connect San Antonio, New Braunfels, San Marcos, Austin, and smaller cities in between.

The nonprofit group is named for the four major springs in each of those cities that gush forth from the Edwards Aquifer on the edge of the Hill Country – the Blue Hole, Comal Springs, San Marcos Springs, and Barton Springs.

“All those cities are here because of those springs,” Morin said.

Preserving water is also a major part of the project. Its goal is to permanently save 50,000 acres over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, where water flows through cracks, caves, and crevices into the aquifer and replenishes the main underground drinking water supply for the region.

Morin, who’s married to Whole Foods founder John Mackey, said preserving land along the booming Interstate 35 corridor will take “a lot of philanthropic money.” Working relatively quietly for the past seven years, the group has already made progress.

Earlier this month, Morin and Great Springs CEO Garry Merritt made their pitch for former San Antonio Mayor Phil Hardberger. Hardberger is no stranger to fundraising for big park projects, having raised more than $10 million in private donations for a [$23 million land bridge](https://therivardreport.com/wurzbach-parkway-to-close-over-weekend-as-san-antonio-land-bridge-takes-shape/) for the public park named for him on San Antonio’s North Side.

“I think you could get public excitement quite easily,” Hardberger told Morin and Merritt. “Nobody needs [the trails] more right now than Austin to San Antonio.”

However, Hardberger said one aspect of the project could make deals with landowners a bit more challenging than other land preservation efforts.

The Great Springs proponents are far from the first people in this part of Texas to put up cash to keep properties wild. Multiple funding programs in the region pay landowners to give up their rights to build on their properties, typically through a legal mechanism called a conservation easement.

In San Antonio, one well-known example is the sales tax that funds conservation easements over the Edwards Aquifer. San Antonio residents and visitors have paid $325 million in aquifer sales over the past 20 years, but most of the land preserved through that program allows no public access.

The Great Springs concept is different. Great Springs’ conservation easements’ will allow people to access trails on at least a portion of the land they preserve, Morin and Merritt said.

“I do worry about the public access part of it,” Hardberger told them, though he added that “all of it is totally possible, conceptually.”

The idea of long, paved trail systems that cross political boundaries isn’t foreign to Texas, which has three such trail networks in the northern part of the state – [Caprock Canyons State Park and Trailway](https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/caprock-canyons) in the Panhandle, the [North Texas Veloweb](https://www.nctcog.org/nctcg/media/Transportation/DocsMaps/Plan/Bike/Veloweb.pdf) in Dallas-Fort Worth, and the [Northeast Texas Trail](https://netexastrail.org/), along the Red River counties on the state’s northeastern border.

For an effort of this magnitude, Great Springs will likely need some federal assistance, Hardberger said. That might get easier after the U.S. Senate earlier in June approved the Great American Outdoors Act, which permanently funds the [Land and Water Conservation Fund](https://www.lwcfcoalition.com/) (LWCF) at $900 million annually.

Set up in 1964 to use royalty money from offshore oil and gas drilling to preserve parkland, the money was originally supposed to go toward conservation. However, Congress has tapped it for all kinds of appropriations over the years.

With the fund now permanently endowed, land preservation projects can receive up to 50 percent of their funding from the LWCF. Federal transportation grants could be used to fund the majority of the construction work on the actual trails, Morin said.

One of the big questions now is where to build these trails. Great Springs is setting up a stakeholder group to create a trail master plan. To help, they’ve tapped Bill Barker, a career transportation planner and former adjunct professor at University of Texas at San Antonio.

“People love the Hill Country, and here’s an opportunity to make it more accessible to a lot of people while at the same time trying to preserve what makes it the Hill Country in the first place,” Barker told the *Rivard Report*.

Barker, who formerly served as VIA Metropolitan Transit’s planning director, shared research from the [London School of Economics](http://newclimateeconomy.report/workingpapers/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/04/LSE-Cities-2014-Transport-and-Urban-Form-NCE-Cities-Paper-03.pdf) that claims that adding street capacity is a hundred times more expensive than bike paths or pedestrian walkways when measuring how many people each type of infrastructure can move per hour.  
  
Another [2011 study](https://bikeleague.org/sites/default/files/PERI_Natl_Study_June2011.pdf) he shared by a University of Massachusetts-Amherst researcher concluded that bicycle and pedestrian facilities generate more jobs per dollar invested than road projects.  
  
That could make these types of projects attractive to governments looking to stretch budgets that have been ravaged by the recession caused by the global coronavirus pandemic, Barker said.  
  
“You can spread a lot of the investment around easier,” Barker said. “That part of what we’re doing is actually kind of a plus, if governments start thinking about economic stimulus and putting people back to work.”

The pandemic has also shown that the time for such an initiative is right, Morin said. With the I-35 corridor one of the fastest-growing regions in the U.S., people will need more access to the outdoors.

“Now with [coronavirus], people are more aware of and appreciative of nature,” Morin said.