

Protecting the Texas Hill Country: The Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan

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Amidst the rolling hills and clear waterways of the Texas Hill Country lies an urgent call to action. The region's natural beauty, treasured by residents and visitors alike, is at a crossroads. The relentless march of development threatens to encroach upon the pristine wilderness that defines this unique landscape. However, there is hope. The recent Hill Country Alliance Leadership Summit opened my eyes to a visionary solution—the Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan. As a commercial real estate agent concerned with responsible development, I was deeply moved by this initiative. It embodies a comprehensive strategy to protect the very heart of the Texas Hill Country. Katherine Romans, whose wisdom resonated at the Summit, suggested that socializing this plan offers an impactful way to advance conservation in our beloved region.

As I delved into the 110-page document, I was struck by its depth and the collective wisdom it represents. It's a call to action, a blueprint for the preservation of the Texas Hill Country's natural infrastructure. This plan is not a mandate for restrictions or a threat to property rights but, rather, a shared vision that recognizes the dynamism and diversity of this region. It provides adaptable tools and a starting point for ongoing collaboration, ensuring that the Texas Hill Country can continue to flourish even as it grows and evolves.

TABLE 1.1

WHAT IS THE HILL COUNTRY LAND, WATER, SKY, AND NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN?

WHAT IT IS:

- A description of why the Hill Country's natural infrastructure is critical for the vitality and resilience of the region
- A springboard for long-term collaboration among partners
- A set of tools to help guide investments in natural infrastructure
- A resource to help understand shared priorities
- A way to prioritize areas for stewardship support and voluntary conservation
- A way to identify potential places for high-impact investments in natural infrastructure
- A resource to inform local planning
- An adaptable vision for how to protect and enhance land, water, sky, and natural resources

WHAT IT IS NOT:

- A map of land use prohibitions or a regulatory plan
- An effort to supplant any local planning
- A plan addressing built infrastructure
- A complete inventory of all the Hill Country's important resources
- Limited to a single map of priority areas
- Limited to protecting a single type of resource or natural infrastructure
- An effort to subvert private property rights
- A requirement that partners, agencies, or municipalities engage in specific projects

The urgency of conservation is evident. Development in the Texas Hill Country has surged, with nearly 115,000 acres of land transformed in just three short years between 2016 and 2019. Without strategic investments in conservation and the protection of natural infrastructure, we risk losing the very essence

that makes the Hill Country so special. This plan offers a path forward, a way to harmonize development with the preservation of our natural treasures.

What sets this plan apart is its unwavering commitment to shared values and goals. It encompasses the voices and perspectives of thousands of Texans, from farmers and ranchers to elected officials, river enthusiasts, city dwellers, business owners, and stargazers. It's a testament to the deep love that Central Texans hold for the Hill Country and the intrinsic value they place on preserving its natural infrastructure.

Beyond its shared vision, this plan offers practical resources. It includes maps highlighting potential natural infrastructure priorities, providing local communities with a solid foundation for their conservation efforts. Moreover, county-level summaries, found in the Plan's appendix, offer valuable support to localized initiatives, ensuring that every corner of the Texas Hill Country can benefit from this comprehensive strategy. These resources could be instrumental in guiding and shaping responsible commercial real estate projects in the region.

The significance of conservation, from an economic and ecological standpoint, cannot be overstated. The data is consistent and compelling, illustrating the substantial returns that investments in conservation provide. For every dollar invested in conservation, there is a return of four to eleven dollars in the form of natural goods and services, including clean air, clean water, and reduced flood risks. This not only has a positive impact on the environment but also enhances the appeal and value of real estate. Conservation also plays a significant role in reducing the cost of water infrastructure, translating to savings of six dollars for every dollar invested in land conservation for water protection. These figures highlight the potential financial benefits of conservation and responsible development measures in the Hill Country.

The economic advantages are not the sole benefit of conservation. Outdoor recreation generated a staggering \$37.5 billion in Texas in 2021, reflecting the cultural and recreational value of the natural infrastructure. It provides opportunities for boating, fishing, hunting, and a range of other activities that drive local economies. Additionally, close-to-home access to green spaces is essential for maintaining physical and mental health, thereby reducing healthcare costs.

At the heart of this entire effort is a profound connection with nature. Survey respondents emphasize that the primary reason for seeking access to parks, trails, waterways, and open spaces is to connect with the natural world. This connection fulfills a fundamental human need, offering solace and inspiration. The shared love for the Texas Hill Country's natural beauty underscores the significance of the Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan.

BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Providing clean and abundant water
- Keeping farm and ranch lands intact and viable
- Preserving dark skies
- Providing places to recreate and exercise outdoors
- Providing places to fish and hunt
- Promoting biodiversity
- Reducing water treatment costs
- Generating tourism and recreation dollars
- Attracting new businesses
- Supporting pollination of crops and other plants
- Reducing wildfire risk
- Reducing drought intensity
- Providing wildlife habitat including rare and threatened species
- Promoting economic viability of rural and agricultural lands
- Collecting and storing water (aquifer recharge)
- Reducing the impacts of extreme weather
- Reducing intensity of flooding
- Reducing water and air pollution
- Reducing health impacts from extreme heat
- Creating and maintaining healthy soils
- Helping people connect with nature
- Increasing social connections
- Supporting early childhood development
- Providing places to play, gather, and spend time together
- Providing mental health benefits from spending time in nature
- Protecting culturally and spiritually sacred places
- Providing strong regional identity and sense of place

The ultimate vision is a Texas Hill Country where all communities are resilient in the face of extreme weather. It's a vision where everyone has sustainable access to clean water and the opportunity to connect with nature, thanks to robust and protected natural infrastructure systems. The Plan is a roadmap to this future, a future where we can ensure that the Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure of the Texas Hill Country remain intact for generations to come. In the face of rapid development, this plan represents a path forward, where we can formally safeguard the enduring beauty and ecological vitality of this cherished region.

For the full Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan, click [here](#).

(Source: Texas Hill Country Conservation Network)