

Hays County Partners with Nature Conservancy to Create Sentinel Peak Preserve

Press Release from Hays County

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Hays County Courthouse, San Marcos, TX (Nov. 19, 2019) – The Hays County Commissioners Court on Tuesday approved partnering with The Nature Conservancy in Texas to acquire some 530-plus acres of pristine land in western Hays County to help safeguard habitat of the golden-cheeked warbler – an endangered migratory songbird – and the Blanco River from encroaching development.

The land, which straddles the Blanco River for about a mile, is located 18 miles west of San Marcos on FM 32 in an area known as the Devil’s Backbone. It was previously known as “the Boy Scout Ranch” as well as El Rancho Cima, and was subdivided for re-sale, allowing the County to consider purchasing part of it. The new working title for the land is Sentinel Peak Preserve.

“Our goal is to balance preserving the environmental aspects of Sentinel Peak Preserve with the public’s desire to enjoy and learn from it,” Shell said. “We are working on a plan to allow limited access, preserve the warbler habitat during breeding season, and develop and maintain trails and access to the Blanco River for the public to enjoy. This project is especially exciting because it provides a rare opportunity for Hays County to create a preserve that can be used for environmental mitigation related to transportation infrastructure improvements and also conserve a natural area that will benefit the public for generations to come.”

Hays County will contribute \$7 million from the 2016 voter-approved Transportation Bond monies set aside specifically for environmental mitigation. The Nature Conservancy in Texas will fund the remainder, approximately \$6 million, and retain temporary ownership until Hays County eventually purchases the property at the Conservancy’s cost. The Nature Conservancy will continue to hold a conservation easement on the land.

“In partnering with Hays County to protect this property, we have a rare opportunity to simultaneously safeguard this iconic piece of our state’s history and culture while meeting conservation goals and increasing public access to nature in the fast-changing Texas Hill Country,” said Laura Huffman, Regional Director of The Nature Conservancy in Texas. “And the credit really goes to Lon Shell and the rest of the Commissioners Court for their leadership

and support of this project from the get-go. Collaborative land conservation deals like this are the only way to protect the nature we have left in a way that benefits both people and the environment.”

The Sentinel Peak Preserve is home to golden-cheeked warbler habitat and sensitive wildlife as well as rare plant and aquatic species that are negatively affected by increased development. The conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy in Texas allows Hays County to include limited public access within the land management plan, which would require public access activities to have little or low impact to the property.

“Hays County appreciates once again collaborating with The Nature Conservancy in Texas to help safeguard our natural lands, which are quickly disappearing in our fast-growing county,” Shell said, noting that a previous collaboration with the Conservancy resulted in the creation of Jacob’s Well Natural Area.

The decision to move forward with the project was unanimous, and Court members expressed their appreciation for Commissioner Shell’s leadership and for the Nature Conservancy in Texas’ partnership.

“This will be a very special place for our County,” Precinct 1 Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe said. “Public access to this kind of natural land is important for our citizens and future generations.”

Precinct 2 Commissioner Mark Jones, who had to miss the vote but expressed his approval, noted that the teamwork between the County and the Nature Conservancy in Texas had once again benefited the citizens. “Our ability to come together to combine our visions and funding make these partnerships work,” he said. “Partnerships like these are realized because of outstanding leadership like that of Commissioner Shell.”

“While I’ve heard from a few people who think the new preserve, which is partly in Comal County, is ‘too far’ for easy access, it’s important to remember how this iconic land affects the rest of the County, helping to absorb heavy rain and preventing flooding in areas as far away as Precinct 1,” County Judge Ruben Becerra said.

“This is a once-in-a-generation property,” Precinct 4 Commissioner Walt Smith said. “Not only is it a spectacular acquisition, but the logistics required to put this partnership together, with all its moving parts, was extraordinary.”

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