

**Minutes of Comal County Conservation Alliance (CCCA) Community Meeting
Wednesday, July 10, 2018 at GVTC Auditorium**

The meeting was called to order at 6:09 pm by Elizabeth Bowerman, President.

Elizabeth extended a warm welcome to all attendees, acknowledging many new faces. Most had heard of the meeting through the CCCA Facebook page. She announced CCCA is all about folks actively doing something to address the rapid growth in Comal County, and the need to preserve the county's land and water before it was too late. CCCA needs everyone to join the effort. She then introduced members of the CCCA Board of Directors. Community group representatives were then invited to make any announcements they might have.

Milann Gukian of the new Preserve Our Hill Country Environment (Stop 3309 Vulcan Quarry) announced they were fighting Vulcan Quarry's encroachment into the Hill Country, and gave an update on the status of the effort to get a contested case hearing at the Texas Council on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). She mentioned there would be a fundraiser tomorrow, July 11, and invited everyone to attend and support them. The group is working on a platform for being effective advocates in the contested case hearing, and how to pay for their attorneys.

David McCallum of Sentinel Peak Preserve stated that they're working hard to protect this roughly 2,800-acre Boy Scout Camp along the Devil's Backbone. The former Rancho El Cima is currently for sale by its owner, the Houston Area Boy Scouts of America. It lies partially in Comal County and partially in Hayes County. They need \$24M to buy it and another \$500,000 to set up the foundation to own and manage it. They have an interested buyer helping to get the money and they will also have a major fundraiser this fall. The SPP board wants it to be a youth camp with controlled public access. Their buyer is interested in putting a conservation easement on the property. They want to work alongside CCCA, and asked attendees to please join their Facebook page and support the effort. Losing this battle will likely result in the property being sold to a developer for lots of little private ranchettes.

Leslie Dey announced that she is the new President of Friends for the Preservation of Historic Landa Park. Their group is affiliated with CCCA and will put their support behind CCCA. She invited attendees to come see what they are doing at Landa Park for New Braunfels and the surrounding area. Landa Park is an old established park and they've been working to ensure park improvements were in the City's new Master Plan. City Council did not support it. The park is overused because of limited green space in the area. Tim Barker, former President of the Friends group, added that the issue is "not dead until its dead," and that the City may still adopt a 2019 capital improvements bond to include Landa Park improvements.

Julie Whitaker of the Upper Guadalupe River Association announced they were planning a river cleanup at 311 on Sept. 29. Their biggest concern right now is a lack of water in the upper Guadalupe River in Comal County.

Joel Dunnington, for Lindheimer Master Naturalists, announced Daniel Oppenheimer of the Hill Country Alliance will speak at their meeting, Thursday, July 19 at 6:00 about growth in the Hill Country. He invited all to attend.

Steven Kling announced he is running for the seat in Senate District 25, and that he is running on a platform of more local control, particularly on issues relating to development.

CCCA Vice President Helen Ballew then read aloud the stated goals of the CCCA:

- 1) *Promoting public awareness and education about public and private land preservation opportunities;*
- 2)

- 3) *Encouraging county-wide planning efforts to identify and preserve critical elements in Comal County, including aquifer recharge and contributing zones; creeks and rivers; environmentally sensitive habitats; and areas of cultural significance and scenic beauty, in order to protect them for future generations;*
- 4) *Providing a platform for organizations and individuals to share resources, knowledge, skills, and strategies in a coordinated effort for land preservation; and joining with other organizations of like purpose in order to amplify our collective voices and efforts towards preserving the Comal County's land, water, wildlife and way of life.*

She then called on CCCA Committee Chairs to give a brief report on the work of their committee volunteers.

Georgia Shafer of the Communications & Marketing Committee publicly thanked the McKenna Foundation for sponsoring the first year of the CCCA website (www.comalconservation.org). It is now live and has a donation page linked to a PayPal account. CCCA's social media efforts are going very well with 125 members already in the Facebook group. There are 120 followers on Twitter, with many more posts and retweets happening there. The average engagement on Twitter is 1% which is considered very high. Lots of clicks and likes. Over 4,000 impressions each week and growing. Hot off the press are some generic business cards courtesy of the Communications Committee. Shout out to Steve Beach who secured a banner for CCCA free of charge. She requested submissions of photographs and video clips of the beautiful Hill Country that we could use in our media and education outreach. Now that the marketing foundation is in place, the Committee will turn its attention more to supporting the communications needs of the Outreach (education) and RDC (fundraising) Committees.

Joel Dunnington gave a report for the Outreach Committee. They are putting together educational information for outreach to the general public. They have nearly finalized an Alliance Partner Organization Agreement for use in recruiting organizations to join our Alliance. He is developing a PowerPoint presentation for CCCA representatives to use giving talks to area groups, including education on the importance of protecting the Edwards Aquifer. The committee is planning an educational conference for landowners in January or February to discuss conservation easements, trusts, transfers of development rights, and the like. He also mentioned that he has produced for the CCCA website an extensive acronym list, a timeline for Comal County historical events, and a very comprehensive list of resources on all manner of nature topics. He encouraged everyone to take a look at this material.

Jensie Madden reported for the Government Affairs Committee, but first said how very excited she was to see so many folks attending because this effort to create the CCCA only really started in January. She reported that the main goal of this committee is to help educate elected officials and advocate for city and county land protection initiatives, saying the committee wants to work with them in positive helpful ways, not adversarial ones. The Alliance needs to be able to work with everyone – developers, officials, community organizations, other folks – and recognize that land in Comal County is going to continue to be developed. The desire is to work together to preserve as much as possible of what brought us all here in the first place. The committee will specifically work on researching public funding options for the county and ask County commissioners to form a task force to recommend options for how Comal County can better protect its land, water and wildlife. The first real in-person committee meeting will be on August 21 where the committee plans to clarify its talking points for speaking to commissioners, and strategize the most effective approaches. She said they want more folks to join them.

Marne Peterson of the Resources Development Committee reported that the purpose of the "RDC" is to champion the CCCA goals by raising dollars, that land is a resource too, and that this committee will work with other committees to accomplish these critical goals. The first RDC meeting last week was a high-energy event. She gave a shout out to Joel for producing the very important resource materials that are helping to educate us all in preparation for our fundraising mission. The committee discussed venues for a kickoff event, and brainstormed

ideas of how to raise money, finding potential donors, getting serious about putting our own money behind these efforts, and writing grants, especially working with the McKenna Foundation on a startup grant which is in progress. She publicly thanked the McKenna Foundation for being very supportive of CCCA's efforts so far. She mentioned that committee members welcome training on how to write grant requests, and asked anyone with experience in this to please join them. She announced that on Tuesday evening, September 18, CCCA will host a kickoff social and fundraising event at the Gruene Grove patio bar. There will be no entry fee, and there will be food, a cash bar, a live band, and a fabulous Silent Auction. She encouraged everyone to join us for this inaugural "Celebration of Conservation" event.

Committee reports having concluded, Helen introduced the guest speaker for the evening, Dianne Wassenich, the long-time Executive Director of the San Marcos River Foundation. Dianne began by telling the group she started her work with the river foundation 33 years ago as a citizen volunteer doing river cleanups, protesting bad permits that allowed polluted discharges into the San Marcos River, basically "all the stuff you'd think a river group would do." She served on the board of SMRF for several years and then became its first and only staff member as Executive Director. After many years of advocacy for the river, SMRF eventually realized the only thing you can do that lasts (and get not overturned) is protect land. So SMRF recently became a land trust and is getting itself set up for the future to acquire and hold easements and even own conservation properties with the goal that these pieces of land will never be developed. Land trusts have to have a special kind of insurance to defend the terms of any conservation easement they hold. Conservation easements "run with the land" and if there are ever any threats to the lands under easement, SMRF will have to defend them, and SMRF is going to do this. There are many land trusts in the Hill Country – the Texas Land Conservancy, Hill Country Alliance, The Nature Conservancy. SMRF is very small and focused in San Marcos. Dianne then showed a map of city protected lands (not including county properties) showing which had been acquired for protection and which ones they are still working on. She spoke in detail of protecting Dreamcatcher Ranch, one they hadn't set out to protect, but as they were working on linking up all these other preserves, they discovered Dreamcatcher Ranch had over 200 acres of a drainage area that runs off the land through grassy fields that the owner had planted in native grasses. Very important for water quality in the Comal River and springs. He came to SMRF because they were trying to preserve land in the area and he wanted to protect his land too. He needed help getting grants and deciding who to pick for a land trust. SMRF decided "hey that's us!" figuring if others could do this, we could too. They got a grant from the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRDC) which provided about 50% of the funding they needed to do a conservation easement on the Dreamcatcher Ranch. The owner needed income but he also ended up donating to the cause. They had to do appraisals of the land's value before restricting it with an easement, and again with the easement restrictions. This is how you establish the value of the conservation easement for tax purposes. Appraisals can be expensive but the landowner paid this. They also had to do a survey and did lots of mapping that illustrated all these watershed ravines that showed what water went where. They discovered that the hills instead of making development more difficult actually make the land more valuable for development because people like the views. They got all this paperwork done. The NRCS has a program to support landowners when they're trying to protect an endangered species area or a grassland area, so they got 75% (??) of the needed money from NRCS. They had about 2 years to find the rest of the match money. It was a hard scramble and they had to ask for an extension – and got it. They applied to TPWD's Farm and Ranchland Conservation Program because this was going to remain a working ranch for now. The conservation easement only restricted development not its use as a park or ranchland. The grant was denied. They were now 2.5 years into this project and thought it wasn't going to come together. They reached out to Andy Sansom, Executive Director of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment for help. They went into living rooms of folks who could loan them the money, but with no success. Andy says they could have done a better job on the grant proposal and they got a second chance, so they did a better job this time and got the grant. SMRF had pledged a little bit, the landowner had to pitch in, and ultimately SMRF got to save its money for the celebration. It was hair raising, depressing at times, hard work, took lots of patience, but they didn't take no for an answer, and eventually

prevailed. She spoke of other tracts of land they're working to preserve, one that is due to close later in the month. She spoke of another tract SMRF bought that they are now selling to city for a park. They got a 1.3% interest loan from the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), which came with a 45% forgiveness so much of the loan is like a grant. The Conservation Fund (TCF) helped SMRF buy another tract for eventual sale to the city and has another parcel TCF loaned the money to buy that now needs a conservation easement before being sold. The City of San Marcos's and SMRF's goal is to have a complete loop corridor of protected lands and a trail encircling the city. Folks will have the ability to travel all around the city without being on the roads.

At the conclusion of Dianne's remarks, there was time for a question: in her 30 years of doing this, how did the county and city progress in that time period in terms of interest in conserving land? Dianne responded that SMRF didn't start out with the best attitude. They had to clean up three major nasty discharges into the river and in so doing, they rattled the cages big time so they weren't much liked. However, over time, they showed they had staying power, people were seeing the fruits of these labors in a cleaner river and folks, including the elected officials, have mostly come around. SMRF is now working very well with county and city officials, and it is hugely important to the success of their conservation work that they have been able to do that.

Dianne was thanked profusely for her excellent presentation, full of great success stories in San Marcos and Hays County, providing wonderful inspiration to the CCCA.

Helen then invited all attendees to join one of the four breakout committee sessions: Communications, Outreach, Government Affairs, and Resource Development, and to consider joining a committee as a member and continue to help in the effort.

Following these committee breakout sessions, there were a few final announcements.

Citizens in Hays County are fighting a Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District (BSEACD) permit allowing 2.5 M gallons of water to be withdrawn from the Trinity Aquifer. Attendees were encouraged to go to the www.ourwaterrights.org website, sign the petition, and find other ways to help out.

Comal County Jen Crownover was publicly acknowledged as having been present and was thanked for being a regular attendee at CCCA meetings.

The Treasurer reported the CCCA bank balance stood at \$436 and invited contributions from all present.

The next meeting, on the second Tuesday of the month, is August 14 at 6:00 PM back at the GVTC Auditorium.

The meeting adjourned at precisely 8:00 PM.

Minutes submitted by Helen Ballew on behalf of the Secretary, Eva Silverfine Ott.