



For Immediate Release

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**Nature as Infrastructure - A Legacy for the Future
by Frank Davis and Kathy Miller - Hill Country Conservancy**

DRIPPING SPRINGS, Texas – Infrastructure. The word usually brings to mind things made of metal and concrete – highways, bridges, dams, pipelines, utilities – the man-made structures and facilities of the modern world that provide us with transportation, energy, communication, flood control, and water.

However, it is time to recognize that our environment provides natural structures that can serve the same purpose without moving earth and pouring concrete. This natural infrastructure does not require construction, but it definitely requires protection. Natural infrastructure refers to land, watersheds, vegetation, and aquifers that can provide innumerable public benefits such as drinking water, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, food and fiber, and recreational opportunities.

This month, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network released the [*Hill Country Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan*](#), as a resource to spotlight where and how natural infrastructure provides value to the natural resources of the Hill Country and its communities.

Approximately 95 percent of land in Texas is privately owned, which means most of these public benefits originate on private lands. It is critical that we help these private landowners care for the natural resources that the entire population depends upon.

Private landowners are under increasing pressure to sell or subdivide their land due to the costs of maintaining the land, development pressure, and a lack of awareness that care for the water and land infrastructure of our beloved Hill Country serves us all.

Stewardship and conservation of private lands are critical for relieving these pressures. Partnerships with willing private landowners can result in substantial improvements to water quality, improve wildlife habitat and increase agricultural productivity for our region and beyond. At the same time, these conservation efforts can provide enormous public benefits including protecting water supplies, reducing flooding, and providing resilience to a changing climate.

Conservation easements can ensure the long-term protection of natural resources on private lands. They are voluntary agreements with private landowners who want to

ensure that their land will remain permanently intact and protected. These agreements allow for ongoing use for agriculture, wildlife management, and recreation including hunting and fishing. Easements allow for residential use by the landowners with some including rights to additional residences for future generations.

Conservation easements also allow most landowners to continue using and managing their land as they have in the past, but with no future development, subdivision, or other commercial uses. After all terms of the conservation easement are agreed upon by the landowner, those terms become permanent and stay with the land regardless of future ownership. This gives the landowner confidence that their long-term wishes for the property will be fulfilled while providing assurance to the public that the land will continue to provide many natural infrastructure benefits.

According to the recent [State of the Hill Country Report](#), conservation organizations, cities, counties, and the state have protected over 550,000 acres of land in the Texas Hill Country. That is an impressive figure, but the pace of strategic land conservation is dwarfed by the pace of development. As one of the fastest-growing regions in the nation, development threatens the natural beauty and the natural resources of the Hill Country – the very things that attract people to the region.

In recent years, significant resources have been devoted to establishing conservation easements on private lands and creating preserves and parks. The City of San Antonio has invested over \$500 million to preserve thousands of acres of recharge lands over the Edwards Aquifer - the city's primary drinking water source. The City of Austin and Travis County have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to preserve the Barton Springs segment of the Edwards Aquifer as well as large swaths of habitat for endangered species, with substantial benefits to preserving drinking water resources. Hays County voters approved \$75 million in bonds for parks and open space to preserve thousands of acres of critical watershed lands. And Kendall County voters recently approved \$25 million in parks and open space bonds. Local bonds like these can be leveraged and complemented by state and federal programs through the [NRCS](#), [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department](#), and others.

In addition to conservation easements, there are other ways to assist private landowners who are caring for precious natural resources. Among these are incentive programs through the USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#), the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#), and the [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department](#), each of which provides reimbursement of costs for land and habitat enhancement projects. Several active Regional Conservation Partnership Program projects are also led by nonprofit, academic and agency partners to assist private landowners with stewardship projects.

Texas devotes many billions of dollars each year to building traditional infrastructure while undervaluing the cost-effectiveness and benefits of investing to protect natural infrastructure on private lands. Hill Country Conservancy, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network, and our many partners in the region are dedicated to expanding the concept of infrastructure in ways that protect the water, wildlife, and wonder of the Texas Hill Country. Learn more at: OurTXHillCountry.org/

About the Authors:

Frank Davis is Chief Conservation Officer at [Hill Country Conservancy](#), a founding Steering Committee member for the [Texas Hill Country Conservation Network](#), and former board member of the [Texas Land Trust Council](#).

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Photo Attachments:



By the Cattle Pen - Photo courtesy of Alison Lyons (2018), Hill Country Alliance



Frank Davis, courtesy of Hill Country Conservancy



Kathy Miller, courtesy of Hill Country Conservancy