

Parks and Land Conservation 6



PARKS AND LAND CONSERVATION

This section discusses both those lands that are dedicated for public use or conserved for the public good to protect natural resources, working farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, community character, or scenic landscapes. Sometimes these missions overlap: parks include lands worthy of conservation and conservation lands may allow public access. This section does not address rare and endangered species habitat.

Existing Conditions

Travis County and the City of Austin have nine parks in the Corridor totaling 1,222 acres. Many of these are relatively new. Since 1997, Travis County, drawing from approximately \$23 million of voter-approved park bond funds that have been ear-marked for Corridor improvements, has added 400 acres of parkland and built many new recreational facilities in parks falling within the limits of the Corridor. The City has also made substantial investments: since 1997, the City Parks & Recreation Department has invested approximately \$8,432,000 within the corridor in land acquisitions. The parks, all of which are sited on the Colorado River or one of its tributaries, have a strong natural resource base, provide opportunities for youth and adult athletic activities, and form the foundations of an extensive greenway system. Travis County is also starting to incorporate interpretive facilities – such as the forthcoming mosasaur-themed playground at Southeast Metropolitan Park (SEMP) – in its Corridor park system. All land that has been acquired for conservation reasons in the Corridor has been done so as part of the park systems.¹⁰ Parkland will be obtained through parkland dedication, landowner donations, conservation easements and fee-simple acquisition.

Travis County's Role: Travis County's historic role as a park provider in the Corridor centered on Little Webberville and Webberville parks and was to provide places to picnic and access the river. Starting in 1997, however, Travis County built one of its first metropolitan parks - Southeast Metro Park (SEMP) - to meet demand for sports facilities in the growing Del Valle area and protect more than 100 acres of steeply sloped woodlands along Onion Creek. In 2005, the County's role expanded again with its initiative to build greenways along creeks in eastern Travis County for recreational and ecological purposes. The Onion Creek greenway is its top priority and the Gilleland Creek greenway, its second. This initiative is continuing with funds approved by voters for this purpose in the 2011 bond election. As a matter of policy, Travis County acquires land, builds, and maintains facilities but does not offer recreational programs, nor does it build or manage neighborhood parks.

¹⁰ Although neither parkland nor a land conservation area, the City of Austin's Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant is regularly open to the public. Managed to encourage wildlife because of the diverse habitat found along its 3.5 miles on the Colorado River, it is nationally known as one of the best birding sites in Texas – harboring over 370 species of birds and an abundance of other wildlife. The site is, also, a destination on the TPWD Heart of Texas Wildlife tourism trail.

City of Austin's Role: The Parks and Recreation Department's (PARD) vision is to preserve the natural character of the Colorado River Corridor and to provide public access to the river for passive and active recreation. In PARD's Long Range Plan land acquisition along the Colorado River Corridor is a high priority. The citizens of Austin have invested heavily in the growth and development of the Lady Bird Lake Corridor, just west of the study area, as well as the parkland acquired within the last 25 years east of U.S. 183 with the passage of various bond initiatives. Most recently, PARD has acquired over 600 acres within the study area with the hopes of developing public access to the river, creating a trail system, and possibly some active recreation. PARD has also worked closely with Travis County Parks in their planning efforts to connect the county parks system with other City of Austin parkland along Onion Creek.

Table 6-1. Colorado River Corridor Parkland and Facility Inventory.

	Acres	Boat Launch	Fishing Pier	Picnic Facilities	Playgrounds	Hiking Trails	Multi-use Trails	Soccer Fields	Ball Fields	Basketball Courts	Volleyball courts
Travis County											
Blue Bluff Park*	80										
Confluence Park*	100										
Little Webberville Park	6	v		v	v						
Southeast Metro Park (SEMP)	299		v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	
Webberville Park	135	v	v	v	v			v	v	v	v
City of Austin											
Colorado/Walnut Creek Park	100										
Morrison Ranch*	320										
Austin Colony Park	9										
Onion Creek Wildlife Sanctuary (Nature Preserve)	173					v					
Total Acres	1,222										
* Undeveloped											

Opportunities and Constraints

Appreciation of the Corridor's Natural and Cultural Resources Grows

A greater appreciation of the Colorado River Corridor's natural, recreational, and cultural value has taken hold in the Austin metropolitan area. Its beginnings can be traced to 2003 when the Austin-Bastrop River Corridor Partnership (ABRCP) formed to foster dialogue among residents, landowners, business interests, government, and other stakeholders about the future of the Colorado River Corridor. Since then, other programs have focused positive attention on this area:

- Voters approved \$15 million in a County bond referendum in 2005 to acquire parkland and

develop the first phase of the Onion Creek Greenway; and in 2011 approved both \$13.3 million to build the second phase of improvements for the Onion Creek Greenway and \$16.6 million to continue parkland acquisition along Onion Creek and Gilleland Creek,

- ABRCP releases “Discovering the Colorado: A Vision for the Austin-Bastrop River Corridor” in 2006 describing stakeholder interests and the ecology, history, and present day conditions of the Corridor, and
- The Trust for Public Land (TPL) releases “The Travis County Greenprint for Growth” in 2006, identifying eastern Travis County’s floodplains as the largest concentration of high priority land needing to be conserved.

Today, the trend continues with City of Austin’s targeting of eastern floodplains for conservation and protection in their Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan.

Land Restoration within the Corridor

A critical part of land stewardship is restoration of disturbed and degraded areas in the study areas. In particular, riparian restoration should be conducted through cooperation of public and private parties following a well-developed restoration plan that is supported by the best available research and benchmarked success in similar corridors.

Greenways Serve Multiple Purposes

Travis County decided to develop greenways as part of their park system in eastern Travis because they serve multiple purposes:

- As parkland, greenways are places where people can recreate outdoor. Their linear boundaries accommodate extended trail systems that are popular in the Austin metropolitan area. They connect parks, neighborhoods, schools, and other community centers; and sports and passive recreational facilities can be sited along their length.
- There is currently little public land in the Corridor that is predominantly in a natural state. So the large swaths of the greenways that are to be maintained as natural areas will provide people living in this part of the county the opportunity to enjoy nature close-to-home. Because floodplains define the length and breadth of these greenways, the natural areas will consist initially of existing undisturbed bottomlands along the river and creeks. As the land is managed to enhance its natural function, the bottomland woods and grasslands that covered the land before Europeans began harvesting lumber and clearing the land for agriculture in the 1800s will be restored. These areas will become habitat for wildlife as well.
- The scenic quality of the area will be greatly enhanced as the woods and grasslands return. Greenways are visual amenities that people may enjoy when they visit parks, drive past, or live nearby.
- By protecting riparian zones and bringing disturbed bottomlands to their proper functioning condition, important ecosystem services are improved. The impact of storm water is mitigated, surface water is filtered, and groundwater recharged (see Appendix A: Bottomland Restoration for more information about the importance of riparian zones).

Leveraging Public Investments

Public investments in Corridor greenways can be leveraged in two significant ways: 1) connect public land to privately-owned, City-required Critical Water Quality Zones (CWQZs) along waterways. These total approximately 5,000 acres in the Corridor and have the potential to connect to other metropolitan trails such as the Lady Bird Lake Trail; and 2) work with developers to incorporate dedicated parkland into the greenway system. Sometimes, because developers appreciate the value of having access to greenways as an amenity for their subdivision, they offer larger tracts of land than required by the parkland dedication ordinance.

Travis County Conservation Easement Programs

Travis County has initiated a program to conserve land through conservation easements that may benefit the corridor. Texas Senate Bill 1044 was passed in the 82nd Legislature Regular Session granting counties the authority to finance the acquisition of conservation easements. The County executed its first conservation agreement soon after, and has kicked off a land conservation initiative with \$8.3 million allocated for this purpose in the 2011 bond package that was approved by voters in November 2011.

Summary of Critical Issues

- Perhaps the most critical issue relative to building a park system that is centered on the creeks and river in the Corridor is acquiring parkland before it is slated for development or mining. Obtaining funds for parkland acquisition, as well as building park facilities, is the biggest obstacle to accomplishing this goal.
- Once parkland with bottomlands is acquired, protection or restoration of the riparian zone ecosystem services is a major objective. For this purpose, land management plans need to be prepared and operation and maintenance (O&M) funds dedicated to this initiative.
- In addition to obtaining capital to purchase parkland, funds for the ongoing O&M of an expanded park system need to be allocated to this purpose (Whereas the county is responsible for maintaining parks, it is in the interest of the County to have other parties manage land conservation easements).
- Development of a restoration plan for the corridor to address disturbed riparian areas with the objective of maximizing ecological, hydrological, public use and water quality functions in the study area should be pursued through a public-private partnership.

