

PLANNING FOR GROWTH IN COMAL COUNTY

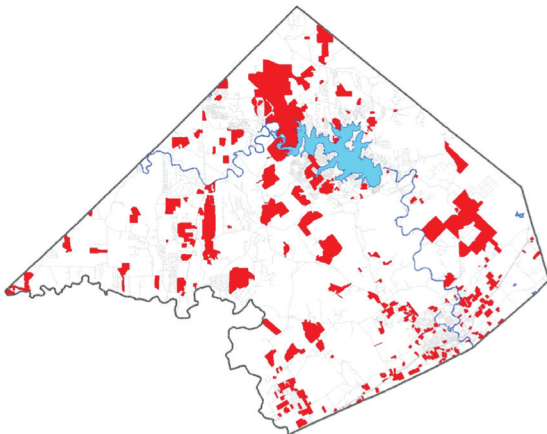


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Comal County Subdivision Growth 1995 to 2013

Subdivisions – Acres => 10 OR Lots => 10



Credit: Tom Hornseth, Comal County Engineer

February 2-3, 2017 Conference Report: Input and Goals from Participants

Overview:

Comal County is experiencing rapid population growth and development pressures. Moderate growth projections estimate that the county will have more than 150,000 residents by 2030 and more than 180,000 or as many as 300,000 by 2050. Comal was the second fastest growing county in Texas in 2014-2015, and Comal ISD is one of the fastest growing school districts in the region (Source: Templeton Demographics). As the county becomes more densely developed, unincorporated areas face particular challenges in preserving wildlife habitat, managing water quality, and maintaining land for recreational use.

The Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, the League of Women Voters of the Comal Area, and the Hill Country Alliance organized this conference in order to explore some of the challenges posed by rapid growth, offer expert resources, and facilitate community input on preserving the quality of life and the natural beauty of Comal County. Presenters from Comal County, neighboring communities and national organizations shared insights on a range of topics including open space preservation, stewardship of water resources, and county-wide collaboration. They offered proven practices to preserve watersheds and wildlife habitats, tools for managing growth in unincorporated areas, and strategies on funding parks and land conservation. Copies of the conference presentations are available at www.aquiferalliance.net/comal.

Community Input:

154 individuals participated in the conference on February 2 and 150 individuals participated on February 3 including local residents, business owners, community groups, and representatives of local government. Six elected officials attended the conference. After the presentations, participants discussed questions and ideas as a group. They used their smartphones and other devices to share responses through an instant polling tool. A total of 60 individuals responded to the questions electronically with an average of 34 responses per question. Responses to open ended questions reflected ideas generated in small group discussions. The following is a summary of responses with the most frequently occurring themes listed first.

What do you perceive as the biggest threats to water quality in Comal County?

- Rapid growth, density
- Lack of county authority for planning, land use, and zoning
- Need for more municipal control over development, including tree ordinances
- Power of development
- Loss of riparian areas
- Storm water runoff and pollution from subdivisions, roads and fertilizers
- Expansion of impervious cover
- Sewage infrastructure
- Deer and hog population

What new ideas were sparked by the presentations on water quality?

- Improve coordination between entities
- Write to state representatives
- Education and awareness
- Importance of regional planning
- Long term water planning
- Importance of individual conservation
- Many organizations willing to help, referenda have been successful

Are there particular areas of Comal County where open space should be protected? Why?

- Guadalupe River and other river corridors.
- Edwards Aquifer recharge areas.
- Around creeks and other waterways, to protect water quality and riparian health, to protect wildlife habitats, for flood control, recreational use and trails
- Cibolo Creek
- River Road
- Devil's Backbone (FM 32)
- Along I-35
- Along 281, for water quality
- Land near 281 & 46
- FM 2722, beautiful and at risk of development
- Canyon Lake

Would you support funding to acquire land to protect water quality?

100% of individuals responding to the poll would support funding to acquire land to protect water quality. 93% of respondents would support a mix of private and public funds. The remaining respondents indicated support for either private funding only or for public funding only.



Judge Krause

Shared Goals:

On the second day of the conference, attendees participated in facilitated planning sessions to develop preliminary goals and strategies to preserve the quality of life and natural beauty of Comal County. The following is a summary the groups' work. A more detailed report on participant input is available at www.aquiferalliance.net/comal

Goal #1 Improve water quality.

Next steps:

- 1) Enact local and state policies to improve water quality and flood infrastructure.
- 2) Prevent water pollution through education and hazardous waste management practices.
- 3) Enforce & maintain high water quality standards.
- 4) Decrease storm water impact through landscape management.
- 5) Increase water safety with increased testing opportunities.
- 6) Enact policies to encourage greywater usage.
- 7) Protect wildlife areas.
- 8) Inform and engage Comal County residents in preserving water quality.

Goal #2: Ensure an adequate water supply.

Next steps:

- 1) Enact policies to encourage conservation of current water supplies, including water conservation education and incentives for xeriscaping and low-flow appliances.
- 2) Plan and enact oversight to ensure adequate water resources for future needs, including protecting watersheds and recharge zones.
- 3) Increase supply through investigation of desalination, recharge dams, water recycling, and incentives for rainwater collection.

Goal #3: Preserve open space.

Next steps:

- 1) Protect riparian areas for wildlife habitat, flood control, and water quality.
- 2) Prioritize spaces for preservation by identifying "bio-gems" and unique natural areas.
- 3) Support policies and funding to designate more open space.
- 4) Educate and engage Comal residents on the value of land conservation and opportunities to advance local land preservation.
- 5) Develop and link trail systems within Comal County and the larger region.
- 6) Create a range of recreational use opportunities for residents and visitors.

Goal #4 Foster inter-governmental cooperation to maintain quality of life.

Next steps:

- 1) Cities and counties develop a shared vision for positive growth in Comal County.
- 2) Local governmental entities pool resources and activities for greater effectiveness and reduced redundancy. Examples might be a coordinated wildlife management effort to improve water quality or shared wastewater treatment facilities.
- 3) Create a one stop shop for news and information about regulatory structures.
- 4) Educate and engage developers.
- 5) Improve coordination among government entities and communication with citizens.



Will Abberger, Trust for Public Land

Windows of Opportunity:

Participants brainstormed a range of opportunities to advance these four goals.

- New Braunfels Comprehensive Plan – now is the time to participate.
- Advocate for a county-wide comprehensive plan for unincorporated areas.
- Advocate for local regulations and incentives to manage density and encourage conservation.
- Advocate for state policy changes to allow counties more land-use authority and support preservation goals.
- Educate and engage the public and activate existing community organizations and local news outlets to spread the word.
- Pursue bonds for open space.
- Regional Habitat Conservation Plan – advocate for a preserve in Comal County for mitigation credits.
- Support local efforts like the Comal Trails Alliance and NBU Headwaters Project.
- Neighbors share ideas, solve problems together, and replicate successes.
- Continue to pursue collaborative opportunities.
- Enact and monitor tree ordinances.
- Comal Trinity Groundwater Conservation District – Give citizen input as Rules are developed in 2017, including the Drought Management Plan.



Stacey Dicke, New Braunfels Parks and Recreation; Will Abberger, Trust for Public Land; Todd Votteler, Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust

Next Steps:

This conference represents the beginning of a collaborative community-wide effort to preserve the quality of life and natural beauty of Comal County. Many conference participants indicated an interest in staying involved to advance common goals.

The conference organizers will:

- Distribute the report to elected officials and the media in Comal County.
- Share the report with local chambers of commerce and community organizations to solicit additional input and engagement.
- Form working groups to refine goals and prioritize actions items.
- Collaborate with local organizations and community leaders to advance the goals outlined in this report.



Community members discuss shared goals in a break-out session

Stay Involved:

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