

Land conservation seminar explores options

Outlines measures to preserve county's open spaces

By Will Wright

The Herald-Zeitung

Comal County's open spaces are quickly disappearing, and about 100 regional residents seeking to preserve them attended a seminar that outlined available options for public and private land conservation on Wednesday at McKenna Events Center.

The League of Women Voters-Comal Area and Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, dedicated to preserving the Edwards and Trinity aquifers and their watersheds, sponsored the event, titled "Conserving Land in Comal County – What Are the Options?"

Several speakers reviewed current land preservation areas in Comal County and presented ways organizations and government entities can use to obtain open spaces to protect endangered habitat, area water sources and maintain scenic landscapes.

Annalisa Peace, GEAA executive director and program moderator, said the program sought to compare conservation opportunities that have worked in other Hill Country communities and figure out ways to do the same in Comal County.

Randy Collier's nonprofit, Sentinel Peak Preserve, seeks to purchase land known as The Devil's Backbone on Farm-to-Market Road 32.

The 2,382-acre tract near the Blanco River, straddling Comal and Hays counties, also includes the El Rancho Cima Boy Scout Camp for more than 63 years.

Collier's foundation is halfway toward its goal of raising \$24 million to purchase the land.

He and his wife, Leslie, attended the seminar to learn additional fundraising methods.

"We wanted to find out more about conservation and how to do it," he said. "We'd like to keep the property as it is and run part of it for a youth camp and scout area."

Wednesday's panelists included Comal County Engineer Tom Hornseth; land conservation attorney Julie Koppenheffer; Jensie Madden, LWVCA president; and Dianne Wassenich of the San Marcos River Foundation. The two-hour session also

included a panel discussion with the audience, led by Katherine Romans, Hill Country Alliance executive director.

Hornseth reviewed the county's Regional Habitat Conservation Plan, which designates and protects areas containing endangered wildlife species.

Koppenheffer reviewed how landowners can designate portions of their properties as conservation easements, which allows tax benefits while preserving green spaces and watersheds.

Wassenich detailed how her foundation began purchasing tracts of land in prime watershed areas surrounding San Marcos, and how the organization's five-year effort has paid off in protecting San Marcos Springs, Sink and Purgatory creeks and the San Marcos River.

Romans said Comal County's total land conservation amounts to just 3 percent of the county's total land area, compared to 6 percent in Hays County and 12 percent in Travis County, which recently passed a \$185 million bond to add and preserve green spaces and watershed protection measures.

Wednesday's meeting was GEAA's follow-up to its two-day "Planning for Growth in Comal County" conference held last February, which first discussed ways to preserve open spaces and unique areas being threatened by rapid growth.

Audience members participated in a question/ answer session with the panelists.

Many attendees, including Collier, favored forming a grass-roots organization like the San Marcos River Foundation to get Comal's effort going.

"It's about citizens taking the initiative to form an organization that brings people together to figure this out," Madden said.

Hornseth will be the featured speaker during a League-sponsored luncheon at noon Nov. 14 at the Bulverde Spring Branch Library, 131 Bulverde Crossing in Bulverde.

The meeting, titled 'Development Along Highway 46,' will focus on subdivision and transportation issues.



From left, Dianne Wassenich of the San Marcos River Foundation, land conservation attorney Julie Koppenheffer, Comal County Engineer Tom Hornseth, Jense Madden, League of Women Voters-Comal Area president and Katherine Romans, Hill Country Alliance executive director, participate in a panel discussion on Comal County land conservation options during a seminar Wednesday at McKenna Events Center. **WILL WRIGHT** | Herald-Zeitung

ENVIRONMENT