

Amendments to the North Sector Plan

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Overview of San Antonio's North Sector Plan

The North Sector Plan for San Antonio¹ was developed in order to provide guidance in land use as the City continues to expand. The Plan aims to ensure that the community and its vital resources are protected and quality of life is maximized for present and future members of the community. The North Sector Plan was developed with the intention of best serving all aspects of the community which is outlined by the plan as: transportation, housing, economic development, parks, open spaces, community facilities, land use, urban design, and military compatibility. In serving the community, the Plan declares three key values: Preserving, Enhancing, and Developing. Within these values, preserving the natural resources of the land including the Edwards Aquifer is identified as invaluable to the community now and in the future, and therefore its protection is vital to the City's development.

The Plan's jurisdiction encompasses the area bounded by: the City's Extraterritorial Jurisdiction boundary in the north which includes unincorporated land within Bexar, Comal, Kendall, and Medina Counties; Toepperwein Road and Interstate Highway 35 in the east; Loop 410, Grissom Road, and Culebra Road in the south; and Loop 1604 and Texas Highway 16 (Bandera Road) in the west. This area includes a wide range of Land Use Components to manage, divided into Tiers and Centers, from rural plots of land and natural spaces to higher-density urban areas.²

Within this diverse sector of San Antonio, the Plan works in partnership with thirty-eight entities to achieve its development goals by delineating responsibilities among them in the form of actionable strategies. These strategies are divided into two groups by priority—Near-Term Strategy Responsibility and Overall Strategy Responsibility—and correspond with the needs of the community. Additionally, the Plan includes five neighborhood and community plans that detail specific land uses which supersede the North Sector Plan's recommendations.

The Plan was adopted in 2010, being the first sector plan serving as an additional component to the City's Comprehensive Master Plan. Its adoption allowed San Antonio to better serve its residents by focusing on the North Sector's geographic conditions and socioeconomic needs specifically. However, if the land use structure presented in the Plan becomes inadequate, the City is able to pass amendments to adapt to possible changes to better meet its needs. Specifically, the Plan states that amendments must serve to contribute to an overall improvement for the North Sector and not the benefit of specific landowners; further, the plan must not negatively affect the overall community by altering existing land use patterns, affect the existing character of the area, nor significantly alter recreational amenities.

¹ City of San Antonio Planning Department, *North Sector Plan: Shaping the Future of San Antonio*, San Antonio, Texas, 2010, <https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/Planning/NPUD/NorthSectorPlan2010.pdf> (accessed July 22, 2021).

² The map that outlines the original land usage in the North Sector of the City can be found on page 57 in the official North Sector Plan document.

Amendments to the Plan

City of San Antonio archived court documents reveal 180 filed cases which contain proposed plan amendments between the years 2013 through 2021. In total, 85 of the proposed plan amendments have been approved since 2013. When categorically broken down by land use type, a sector change from Suburban Tier to General Urban Tier was filed most frequently with 15 approved cases; land use changes from Rural Estate Tier to Suburban Tier were close behind at 14 approved cases thus far. Of the approved amendments, 26 are located within the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, 28 on the contributing zone, 29 on the artesian zone, and 2 fall within both the recharge zone and the contributing zone. Two firms represented about half of all approved cases—Brown & Ortiz P.C. represented 27 of the cases and Kaufman & Killen Inc. represented 15, totaling 42 of the 85 approved cases.

One can request a plan amendment or zoning change through an online application or by submitting a paper application to the City’s Zoning Section office; after payment, the amendment process can take 2 months or longer, depending on if it requires additional review by other City departments.³ For the North Sector Plan, the applications are reviewed by a Planner in the Zoning Section, and it is then determined whether a plan amendment needs to be created if the land use proposed by the applicant is inconsistent with its current use.⁴ Additionally, any changes made within the Edwards Recharge Zone Overlay District are reviewed by San Antonio Water Systems in a Site Investigation Report, and a public hearing will commence once the report is submitted.⁵

Methodologies

We used the City of San Antonio's digital legislative archive Legistar to search for proposed land use changes that would require amendments to the North Sector Plan. Legistar catalogs legislation files and City Council, Board, and Committee meetings and hearings, providing their agendas and meeting information. Under the “Legislation” tab on the website, we were able to specify our search within the archive by using drop-down menus to denote type of document and year. Specifically, we input a search query containing the words “Plan Amendment North Sector” and selected the document type “Plan Amendment” from the drop-down menu. We did a separate search for each year, as early as 2013 all the way through 2021.

Within all files pertaining to North Sector Plan amendments, we then located important legislation details of each case: file number, legislation type, agenda date, approval status, and background information which includes the location of the land use change and the applicants or

³ City of San Antonio Development Services Department Zoning Section, *General Information and Application Instructions*, Cliff Morton and Business Services Center, last modified July 10, 2020, <https://docsonline.sanantonio.gov/FileUploads/DSD/ZoningandPlanAmendmentApplication.pdf> (accessed July 22, 2021).

⁴ City of San Antonio Development Services Department Zoning Section, *General Information and Application Instructions*.

⁵ City of San Antonio Development Services Department Zoning Section, *General Information and Application Instructions*.

representatives of each case. We were able to determine whether the amendment was approved by verifying if the file contained a signed ordinance.

After identifying all approved plan amendments, we then used ArcGIS software derived from the Interactive Regulatory Zone Map on the Edwards Aquifer Authority website to locate which aquifer zones would be affected by the land use changes. We searched each address used in the ordinances to do so, and then categorized approved plan amendments based on their location on the aquifer.

Conclusions

Overall, our findings suggest that the City of San Antonio is approving a considerable amount of plan amendments to the San Antonio North Sector Plan since its adoption in 2010; these amendments are consequently altering the land use plans that were originally approved. Our findings demonstrate that a large portion of amendments are changing land dedication to urban and high-density suburban development. These changes are significant in that higher-density development can result in an increase in pollution within the recharge and contributing zones. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, urbanization causes more pollutants, such as sediments, oil, or even toxic chemicals from motor vehicles, to enter stormwater runoff.⁶

Since both the contributing and the recharge zones play a vital role in supplying water to the Edwards Aquifer, their contamination is of great concern—this is due to the way water is gathered and stored. The contributing zone encompasses the area above ground where rainwater is accumulated and then transported to the recharge zone.⁷ The recharge zone is where this water enters the aquifer, drained below the surface through porous karst limestone; the water is then stored completely underground in the artesian zone.⁸ As water travels through the Texas Hill Country, then directly funneling into our water source, pollution of these aquifer zones will inevitably impact water quality.

As aforementioned, the Sector Plan was made in partnership with several organizations who provided valuable insight into the best interest of San Antonio as the City continues to develop. In order to achieve the desired benefits of the San Antonio North Sector Plan, there must only be minimal changes to the plan in order to ensure the desired outcome. We concluded that a large number of amendments poses a risk to the San Antonio water supply and undermines the original intention of the North Sector Plan.

⁶ “Nonpoint Source: Urban Areas,” United States Environmental Protection Agency, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/nps/nonpoint-source-urban-areas>.

⁷ Gregg Eckhardt, “Introduction to the Edwards Aquifer,” The Edwards Aquifer Website, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.edwardsaquifer.net/intro.html>.

⁸ Eckhardt, “Introduction to the Edwards Aquifer.”

References

- City of San Antonio Development Services Zoning Section. *General Information and Application Instructions*. Cliff Morton and Business Services Center. Last Modified July 10, 2020. PDF, <https://docsonline.sanantonio.gov/FileUploads/DSD/ZoningandPlanAmendmentApplication.pdf> (Accessed 22 July, 2021).
- City of San Antonio Planning Department, *North Sector Plan: Shaping the Future of San Antonio*. 5 August 2010. <https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/Planning/NPUD/NorthSectorPlan2010.pdf> (Accessed 22 July 2021).
- Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance. “GEAA Comments on Preliminary Draft North Sector Plan.” June 4, 2010.
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Appendix A

San Antonio North Sector Map

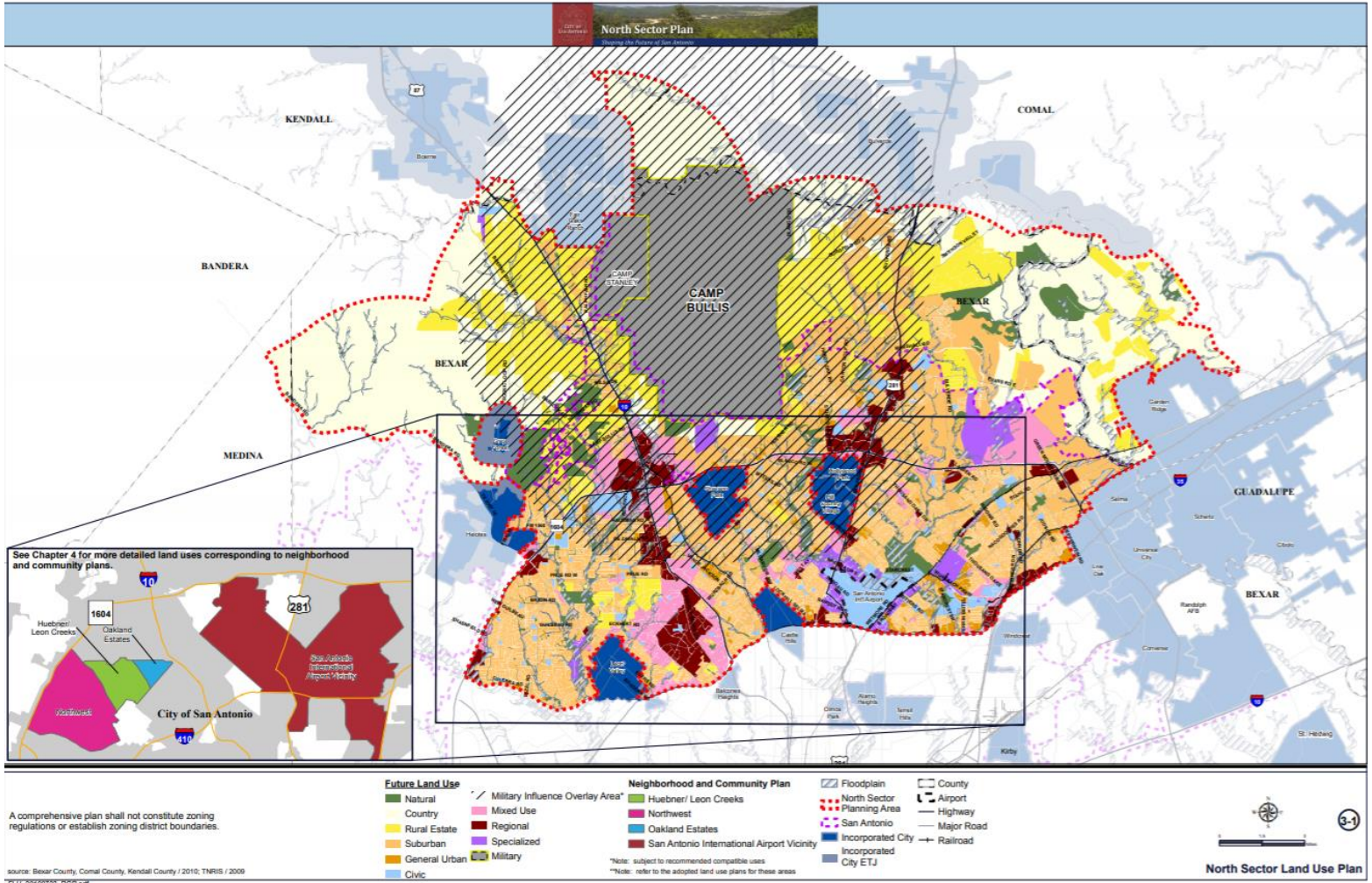


Fig. 1 The San Antonio North Sector Neighborhood and Community Plan

Appendix C

Summary of GEAA Comments on Preliminary Draft North Sector Plan

The GEAA community provided comments to the original North Sector Plan draft that aimed to help the city plan protect the aquifer.⁹ These comments include recommendations on: Land use goals; Urban design goals; Transportation and infrastructure; Utility goals; Housing goals; Community Facilities and Education Goals and Strategies; Growth and Expansion of UTSA and other post secondary institutions; and the Natural Environment and Historic Resources Goals and Strategies.

⁹ Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, “GEAA Comments on Preliminary Draft North Sector Plan,” June 4, 2010, <https://aquiferalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GEAACommentsNsectorPlan-cvr-combined.pdf>