Proposal: Support legislation that promotes long-term housing affordability and enhances water security. Support legislation that strengthens housing construction and resiliency standards and protects sensitive aquifer contributing and recharge zones. Avoid rolling back regulations that protect water quality.

Rationale: Texas is short on housing and shorter still on affordable housing. Texas is at least 320,000 homes short of what its growing population needs, and more than 30% of Texan households are cost-burdened. More houses need to be built, and more of them need to be affordable to homeowners and renters. But it matters where and how they will be built. At the same time as it is facing housing challenges, the state also faces water shortages, flooding, and threats to water quality. With no change to its approach to development and to water management, Texas faces a "real and present potential for civilization altering drought."[1] Solutions to the affordable housing shortage should not place water supplies or Texans more at risk from the impacts to water quality, from water shortages or floods, or from a combination of poor construction and natural disasters. These impacts could cause long-term expenses to residents and to the state that could offset any short-term increases in housing affordability.

Issue: While regulations and zoning ordinances are often discussed as barriers to housing development and affordability, there are many other factors at play that increase costs for residents. Sprawl-style development – especially over critical agricultural and conservation lands – institutional investors and investor-owned short-term rentals (SRTs), parking minimums, rapidly rising housing insurance premiums, and ineffective or poorly enforced building codes all play a part in keeping affordability out of reach of many Texans.[2] These factors make it more difficult to build housing units; keep housing units off the market; and lead to higher transportation, insurance, repair, and utility costs for residents, among other impacts. Tackling these issues rather than rolling back environmental regulations can help increase affordability for residents while still protecting water supplies, especially in Central Texas.

Because the Edwards and Trinity aquifers are karst limestone aquifers, they do not filter the water that recharges them; they are highly susceptible to contamination from pollutants, waste, bacteria, and contaminants of emerging concern like pharmaceuticals and PFAS. Central Texas water supplies are also facing critical challenges due to drought and population growth. Many regional groundwater conservation districts are in emergency drought stages or are nearing worse-case scenario drought stages, while many local reservoirs have hit record lows over the last few years. Increasing population growth and development will further strain these crucial water supplies for millions. These increases may also lead to greater stormwater runoff and flooding in the region, due to the unique geography of the Texas Hill Country. Water quality impacts, water shortages, and flooding all raise costs on the state, counties, cities, and local residents.

Options:

- Encourage responsible increased housing density by encouraging development *in the existing urban core* through allowing accessory dwelling units; lowering parking minimums; allowing smaller lot sizes; converting office, commercial, or religious properties; and restricting investor-owned SRTs.
- Support stronger, more resilient building codes and standards by enforcing stronger state-wide residential building codes and standards; allowing cities to require more stringent or Fortified™ building standards; granting counties authority to regulate building codes and standards; encourage communities to increase participation in the FEMA Community Rating System; and not prohibiting cities from enacting voluntary higher building codes and standards.
- Restrict growth over sensitive Edwards and Trinity karst aquifer recharge and contributing zones by requiring realistic water availability and sustainability reporting for all new developments; enhancing state wastewater permitting requirement for developments in these areas; and maintaining and enhancing city and county regulatory authority over developments in these areas, especially to encourage conservation developments and the use of green infrastructure.

[1] https://texas2036.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Prospective-Costs-and-Consequences-of-Insufficient-Water-Infrastructure-Investment-in-Texas_11182024_FinalCover.pdf

[2] Read more about housing challenges, water challenges, and GEAA's recommendations to responsibly respond to these challenges here: https://aquiferalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GEAA-Housing-and-Water-Concerns-in-the-Hill-Country-2.3.24.pdf