



WQPL Stakeholder Steering Committee Meeting

August 4, 2009 6:00-8:30pm

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Classroom

1. Introductions – Kevin Thuesen

Kevin reminded the stakeholders to raise their hands when they would like to speak because that was one thing people mentioned in feedback regarding to the last meeting. He also reminded the group that the next Walk For a Day public meeting will be tomorrow night (August 5) from 6:30 to 8:30 at Sunset Valley City Hall.

He showed a short video of recharge at Flint Ridge Cave during a rain event. The water gushed into the cave without slowing down. The cave previously had a gate at ground level and water and debris would back up, but it has not been seen to back up since the new (lower) gate was added. Kevin said the entrance will continue to enlarge over time.

Kevin next showed the stakeholders a series of aerial images of the Slaughter Creek trail route to illustrate how it changed throughout the planning and construction process. The first slide represented 2003 and was the flagged route based on how the stakeholders had envisioned it. Cultural and karst analyses were done later, and the route was changed to avoid sensitive features. The trail also travelled near a pond that was dry during planning, but in 2007 it was keeping the area fairly wet, so the trail was rerouted to go around it. The pond is now completely dried up because of the drought. The trail was also designed so that the eastern portion can be closed if it is wet without needing to close the rest of the trail. An ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) portion of the trail was also added. Kevin also noted the change in the Circle C neighborhood, which is adjacent to the trail (many houses were built during the progression of the photos). He also pointed out a stock tank that contains a natural drain that make it work like a recharge feature but whose geology suggests it is not associated with the Edwards. This stock tank also brought about a change in the trail route due to this feature. Kevin noted there were a variety of changes to the trail route as it progressed from a line on the ground to a built trail, and WFAD is not yet a line on the ground.

Willy added that that the City has a site development permit for the Slaughter trail, and the City has to go through the same hoops as developers. Some of the changes to the trail were also a result of permit requirements.

Kevin said staff met with an inspector from the Development Review Department Monday and the trail is close to being opened (pending additional submittals), although the exact date is still to be determined.

2. Overview of Upper Bear Creek and Onion Creek – Steve Windhager

Steve explained that Upper Bear Creek and Onion Creek are the north and south ends of WQPL (respectively) as it relates to WFAD. Steve reviewed the mission of WQPL and priorities for his suitability analysis:

- Protect water quality and quantity
- Minimize soil erosion, vegetation loss, and water contamination
- Minimize interference with land management and ecosystem services
- Protect sensitive areas including endangered species and karst species

Upper Bear Creek

Steve shared his suitability map for Upper Bear Creek. He said his team will attempt to avoid “red” (extremely sensitive) areas, but it will be impossible to avoid them entirely. He said knowing that those areas are extremely sensitive, his team will spend extra time working with Chuck Flink’s group to make sure that the trail is done in a way that does not adversely affect any of the issues this group has discussed. Steve showed a map of the geology of the area that delineated the different layers and faults in between them. He said this underlying geology explains why the landscape is not unlike a kitchen colander. When there are many colors on the map, there are lots of different geologies. Anywhere two geologies touch, there is a higher chance of recharge features being present. He said the map proves that the City did a good job by purchasing these lands to protect water quality. It also tells us that we need to be very careful passing a trail through these areas.

The vast majority of the Upper Bear Creek management unit is an oak-juniper savanna. There is an outcropping of blackland prairie soil and some steep adobe in the southern portion, but otherwise the majority of the management unit is ecologically similar. Bear Creek itself does have a different habitat. Surveys in 2003 showed that the northern portion of the area was occupied by golden-cheeked warblers. There is a mixture of native and nonnative grasses, but more nonnative than not. The land is recovering from past abuse and is thus prone to erosion. Steve said the City has been doing brush control over the past ten years, and the systems are recovering quite well. There are many karst features in this landscape, including large sinkholes and caves.

- *What is AARAL?* Kevin said it is a 14-acre tract included in the Upper Bear Creek management unit. AARAL is an acronym for a corporation. It is not contiguous with the area that the WFAD trail will travel through.

In 2001, the stakeholders recommended educational use only for Upper Bear Creek management unit, and there were no conditionally recommended uses.

Steve said his team has already begun their survey of the northern portion of Upper Bear Creek management unit.

Onion Creek

Onion Creek is the southernmost watershed that the WQPL protects. Steve said it does not have quite as many different geological formations and karst features as other areas of WQPL. However, those present are highly significant. Most of the area is grassland to open savanna with primarily oak and juniper mottes. There are many nonnative grasses that are now recovering to native conditions. There has been one endangered bird sighting on the property to date (before the City of Austin owned the property), and there is potential habitat. Onion Creek has lots of good grass coverage, which could help prevent erosion and protect karst. In 2001, the stakeholders recommended hiking, hunting, and educational uses for Onion Creek. It was also conditionally recommended for mountain biking and horse riding.

Steve mentioned the asphalt road that already exists in the Onion Creek property. He said it could possibly be an area for a portion of the trail on road. He also mentioned a cave with porcupines on the property. It is a health concern due to relapsing fever, a disease that is carried by ticks that live on the porcupines and other rodents. City staff has already experienced relapsing fever from the cave. Another nearby cave has a significant drop at its vertical entrance.

Overall, the Onion Creek management unit could manage a trail fairly safely. The most sensitive areas are near Onion Creek, so Steve asked the group to think about how they could keep the trail away from it.

Steve invited the stakeholders to join his team for karst surveys Tuesday through Saturday from 7am to 12pm. He said his staff is working with City of Austin Watershed Protection to identify which karst features are the most important. Steve showed a map showing the one-mile route that his team surveyed today with his GPS unit.

- *How far apart do you space the ground truthing?* Steve said his team is searching a 300-foot buffer for the potential trail route. They are grouped into seven teams of one or two people each spaced 50 feet apart. They walk so that they can see the teams on either side of them to make sure everything is being covered.
- *How long is the distance?* It took the staff four hours to cover a one-mile segment of trail.
- *How far would you consider to be the average minimum detection range for a feature?* Steve said it depends on how thick the brush is. Some brushy areas were reviewed twice or three times.
- *How many times will you run the one-mile course?* Steve said one time. He said his GPS units tell if they completely missed a section, and they can go back to that particular area. He said his team's search pattern is working very well and they are happy with the methodology.
- *Is it 300 feet on either side of the centerline or total?* 150 feet on either side. It is the corridor that is the result of the desktop exercise. Willy said it is important to point out that Chuck Flink and Steve worked together on the corridor: Steve did the desktop exercise and Chuck is designing the trail. Willy said we may find a corridor segment that is too sensitive and we can always go back and restart the process on that portion.
- *On the aerial map, are the houses below Shady Hollow?* Yes, it is the Estates of Shady Hollow. *Is the potential trail route the same one that the City vehicles use on that property?* Steve said no and that route would make a bad trail. He said the neighbors' properties are all buffered to respect the neighbors and allow the neighbors to respect the trail. Maintenance roads are also being avoided wherever possible because they are designed to easily manage a fence and get there as efficiently as possible. This trail is not being designed for efficient travel, but rather for enjoyable travel.
- *Are there plans to investigate for karst features in the washes?* Steve said yes, most of the washes have already been investigated by the City, but his staff will also be going up and down the washes to search for karst features.
- *I've done karst walks, and I think we learned on the field trip that karst features can surprise you and not show up on your first or second walk. How close do you feel you have to be to know whether or not you have spotted them?* Steve said he feels relatively confident that they are getting a good sampling on these trails. His staff is overlapping by weaving back and forth and spacing teams 25 feet apart on either side. Still, there may be some missed features and things may need to be moved again in the field. He said they are doing the best job possible and City of Austin Watershed Development seems to be happy with the way the surveys are being conducted.
- *I'm looking from the search management perspective. Nobody gets to 100% detection.* Steve said he's sure he won't get to 100%. Steve said his team found the significant features that were already known to be there, which was good because it proved they aren't missing the features. There are visual clues to karst features as well that help staff narrow down the search pattern. Willy said it is important to remember that the landscape is dynamic and rainfall events can change the features. Staff will keep finding new features, and that is to be expected. Steve said the important part is having a plan for how to deal with the new features as we find them. Willy reminded the group of Kevin's maps showing how the route at Slaughter changed over time.

3. Feedback from Stakeholder Steering Committee

Sheila said her role was to walk the group through an activity to collect feedback to give to the trail planners. She divided the group into two smaller groups to allow for more personal conversations and asked them to brainstorm all of their concerns and issues. She told the stakeholders they would identify priorities by consensus as a large group afterwards. She reminded the group that there is no wrong answer in brainstorming. The following are the notes from both groups. They voted by dot vote after brainstorming, and priorities as a result of the voting appear in bold.

Group 1

Operation and Management

- **Money**
 - **Is it there?**
 - **Is it sustainable?**
- **What kind of guarantee will we get from Hill Country Conservancy to maintain the trail and for how long?**
- Does City of Austin Watershed Protection cover jurisdiction of all tracts?
 - Who will monitor water quality and quantity?
- How will increasing density around the trail be addressed?
- What about the homeless near the trail?

Enforcement and Regulations

- Trail crossing over Highway 290 is a public safety issue. We suggest Westgate instead of Brodie. It currently has a lot of traffic accidents.
- Concern about people using roads leading to Onion Creek
- Vandalism and law enforcement.
 - Uniformed officers
 - Scheduled patrols
 - Response time

Design and Use

- **Water quality as it relates to recharge to aquifer**
- **Who is going to maintain and control access**
- Will dogs be allowed and how can it be enforced?
- Concern about horses
 - Feces
 - Trample vegetation
 - Separate trail?
- Trail not being used enough
 - Make it interesting
 - Educational signage
 - Interpretative signage
- Concern about education only on Upper Bear

Group 2

- **Limited access**

- **Keeps parking down – less impact**
- **Serious hikers and bikers – less vandalism**
- **Wilderness experience**
- Training/permitting to access trail
 - Orientation and screening
- Bond covenants
 - Not a Parks and Recreation Department
 - Do not stray from WQPL goals and mission
- Impacts to user
 - Attractive nuisances
 - Public health issues (snakes, fever)
 - Injuries/accidents
 - Safety/security
 - Liability of City/County/HCC
- Youth Ranger Program? First responder or docents
- American YouthWorks for trail building and maintenance
- Not impacting land management activities (ex. burn line trails)
- Route planning is different (affected by drought vs. wet season)
- **Protect karst and creeks first**
- Protect cultural resources and endangered species
- People going off trail
- Illegal hunting
- Trash/dumping
- Starting fires
- Proximity to surrounding properties
 - Bothering neighbors
 - Traffic
- Build it with good operations and maintenance in mind
- Preventing illegal activities
- Camping – don't want it. Also illegal camping.
- Education component
- Protecting Barton Springs, salamander, and habitat
- **Minimize development (parking lots, ranger houses)**
- Keeping wild places wild
- Management plan for trail
- Adopt a trail programs
- Connectivity to other trails (near term and future)
- Continuous trail
- Mitigating impacts
- Restrooms at trailhead or throughout?
- Away from neighborhood fence lines
- Prevent “loving it to death”
- Visual buffers from towers and roads
- Long views of areas instead of trail into area
- Use of trail benefits the cause not a burden to the land
- Homeless people
- Lobbying/education to public similar to original WQPL bond passage campaign
- Public transportation/shuttling to trail
- Relationship to other private lands
 - Lodging, stables, and camping nearby

- Fees or volunteering for day use
- Close unit for hunting/charge fees
- Funding for O&M

The groups elected spokespersons to summarize their discussions to the whole group. Judi spoke for Group One. She said many of their issues could be categorized into three categories. They had the most concerns about operations and management followed by design and use and lastly enforcement, regulations, and safety concerns.

Under the category of operations and management, Judi said funding was a top concern. Her group wanted to know what is the guarantee that the project will be sustainable and maintained in perpetuity. She said water quality was at the top of their list of issues under the design and use category. They also spent a good deal of time talking about education and whether or not dogs and/or horses should be allowed on the trail. The category of enforcement and regulation contained discussion about vandalism, homeless camps, and the safety concern with the Highway 290 crossing. Mary Gay added the issue of people staying on the trail and not wandering into Onion Creek. Robin said they also discussed whether or not City of Austin Watershed Protection has the jurisdiction to monitor water quality and quantity.

Andrea was the spokeswoman for Group Two. She said a big issue her group discussed was minimizing development and keeping the wild places feeling wild. They also talked about keeping parking farther apart and allowing limited access without a lot of buildings and restrooms. Other concerns were the protection of karst features and creeks and the educational component. Kevin added bond covenants, not straying from the goals of WQPL, and not impacting land management.

Judi said she liked that they brought up keeping it wild. Sheila said she heard in both groups the talk of whether or not people will be interested in going out in the prairieland, but also how could they could make the trail more interesting.

Steve B. said he felt that a more developed approach north of the Wildflower Center might be more appropriate, but south of it could be better for the wilderness experience. The two areas seem to have different issues (rural and urban). He said he felt like Sunset Valley trails are good examples of trails that feel natural with the limitations of a narrow corridor and houses and strip malls nearby. There are buffering trees that hide the shops and houses.

- *Would alternate routes to the Highway 290 crossing go through WQPL?* Willy said yes.

Sheila said she also heard one of the groups discuss the concern of ensuring that public safety would be available in areas where the City may not have jurisdiction. Both group said they discussed this and the issue of “no man’s land” in the wilderness. Robin said scheduled patrols would be important. Kevin said the discussion for who is responsible must happen before the trail opens. Chris said Parks and Recreation used to have their own police department but have recently merged with the City police. Daryl noted that some of the trail would travel through parkland, some would go through WQPL, etc. Judi said she thought it would matter what each call is about. Willy said they were talking about law enforcement, but there are other issues as well such as search and rescue. He said we need to build the jurisdictional agreements now.

- *Could marshals be in charge of monitoring for trespassing?* Willy said the wildlands have rangers but, they are not peace officers. He said he is investigating the potential to hire peace officers.

Sheila asked the group if they could come to consensus of a prioritized master list to pass to trail planners. Judi said she thought all of the issues were equally important. Mary Gay said she felt that funding was talked about a lot in her group. Robin said when a trail is enforced well, good water quality will also happen. Kevin said he felt that all of the issues really come down to management and operations. Steve B. said he felt it is more about design than having a police officer every two feet along the trail. Good design can enhance the experience and benefit water quality. Kevin said he also heard the theme of protecting the resource. Chris said by resource, they specifically meant water quality.

Sheila summarized the priorities:

- Limiting access points by design to prevent inappropriate uses and to encourage responsible use
 - Maintain the wilderness experience
- Protecting the resource (water quality and quantity)
- Educational tool

Willy asked if they were really talking about limiting access or managing access. Charlie said he thought they were discussing limited access points rather than people. Chris said there were also thoughts about limiting the number of people. Steve B. said he thought that would apply more in rural areas, but not so much in urban areas.

Charlie said if people are coming out for a wilderness experience and running into people every ten feet, they won't come back. Chris said yes, but it could attract more of the other type of user ("party-oriented"). Kevin felt that related to the wilderness experience. He said his group talked about "earning" the trail experience. Limiting access points and managing access by design will help maintain the wilderness experience.

Judi said her group talked about encroachment and how in ten years the surrounding area will not look the same. She said we need to think about that when designing the trail as well.

Steve B. said we should focus on getting stewards for each part of the trail so that money, materials, and labor are brought in. Part of their charge could be addressing spillover from the trail and revegetating. He said we should think about how to capitalize on public interest to improve the mission of WQPL. Mary Gay said the trail could be a huge educational tool. Volunteers experience a lot of learning, and that is just one way the trail could be an educational tool. Steve said corporations could give an endowment to sponsor and maintain part of the trail. Kevin said HCC is trying to do that upfront with the trail endowment, but that doesn't mean that we have to lose the educational efforts along the way.

The Appalachian Mountains have a "protected viewshed" that is actually private land that is protected conservation land without public access. Kevin said that is part of what HCC does as well through easements for open space. That type of work benefits to the mission of WQPL as well.

- *Have studies been done on the effect of erosion on water quality at Barton Creek?* Kevin said he is not sure, but visually you can see the receding banks and loss of vegetation. The creek flow can be affected when the channel becomes wider. Robin said the majority of the recharge features are found in creek beds, so when sediment settles, the features get plugged. Steve said studies have been done nationwide even though they haven't been done in Austin.
- *Do we need to worry about people swimming in the creeks and getting stuck?* Robin said some of the features are gated for safety. Willy said even if creeks aren't flowing it is an issue. He mentioned the rescues at Airman's Cave and Midnight Cave in recent years.

- *Do cavers have access to these caves now?* Kevin said only as volunteers, for educational purposes, or as approved research projects.

4. Next Steps

Willy reminded the stakeholders that they can comment on the WFAD website or through the form in tonight's packet. Steve reminded them that they are welcome to come out for the karst surveys.

The next stakeholder meeting will be after the trail planners have submitted their draft master plan for the WFAD trail. The date is still to be determined.