

COMAL COUNTY

A Master Plan for Great Park,
Open Space & Natural Areas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Draft December 2023
Comal County, Texas

What is the Master Plan?

The Comal County Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas Master Plan represents a significant milestone in the exploration of the community's aspirations for park enhancement and the preservation of its treasured open spaces and natural areas. While the plan endeavors to strike a balance with the County's limited authority over land use, it represents their first significant step in understanding and responding to community aspirations for safeguarding land against excessive development, while also considering the methods that align with the preferences of the voting community. This master planning initiative has provided a public platform for community engagement, the discernment of demands and necessities, and the formulation of overarching strategic focus and direction.

The primary objective of the Comal County Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas Master Plan (POSNA) is to establish a unifying strategic vision and course of action. This Executive Summary, which summarizes the essence of the POSNA Master Plan, serves as an indispensable day-to-day reference for the dedicated staff, esteemed elected and appointed officials, and the engaged public, ensuring alignment with the shared vision.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As the population of Comal County continues to expand and development increases, there is a growing demand for enhanced strategic planning regarding parks, recreational facilities, and natural areas. The master planning process identified five issues as the focus of future assessments and recommendations in this Master Plan.

The Five Key Issues:

- Development and Growth
- Administrative Oversight and Controls
- Recreational Capacity
- Critical Resource Protection and Loss Of Biodiversity
- Access to Parks and Natural Areas

The Master Plan Vision:

The vision is to establish a foundation to guide future decisions for existing and future parklands, identify needed improvements to deliver high quality amenities and facilities, focus on protecting unique environmental resources, and align with the preferences of residents through the efficient use of County resources and partnerships.

Importance of Parks Planning

The provision of parks, recreational spaces, natural areas, and open spaces, has a profound effect on local residents and the economy. For a Comal resident, a park or recreational amenity may serve as the facilitator for their physical health improvement, a means to grow social skills, their economic livelihood in the recreational service sector, a place to rebuild family connections, or as a reason to stay in Comal County. Parkland and natural areas are not just "land," they are a means for the community to grow socially, environmentally, and economically.



CHAPTER 2: COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Key topics covered include:

- A Parkland and Facilities Inventory
- County Demographics and Growth Trends
- Hydrology and Topography Analysis
- Review of Existing County Administration
- Review of City and County Plans
- Regional County Comparison Analysis
- Summary of Non-profits and Organizations in Comal County

Key Observations:

Comal County is large, 575-square miles and is home to 174,986 people. The county currently boasts an older demographic profile compared to both the State of Texas and the nation as a whole. However, this demographic landscape is poised for transformation as new developments continue to shape its population.

Compared to other surrounding counties access to public parks, conservation lands or protected land is limited, much of the land is in private control. Today, there are about 8,330 acres of parkland or protect natural areas, accounting for 0.22% of the total land area. Development trends in Comal County continue to see farm and ranch land developing into residential and commercial uses. Commercial development along major corridors contributes the most to the impervious surface in Comal County.

The County's overall administration oversees a range of departments, each responsible for various public services. These include ensuring public safety and emergency response, managing county roads, delivering indigent health care services, presiding over both criminal and civil courts, supporting county libraries, conducting elections, overseeing correctional facilities and safeguarding natural resources. An examination of the County's administration revealed insights into the management of parks and land use. Presently, park services and operations and the regional habitat conservation plan are administered under the Engineer and Road Department. The FY 2024 adopted budget for this park operations and services is \$964,705, reflecting a 37 percent increase from the previous fiscal year.

Comal County's regulatory authority covers several important areas. It includes overseeing limited subdivision rules, transportation matters, environmental controls, and public health. Land acquisitions by the county must primarily benefit the public, including education, administration, safety, and conservation.

Top 4 insights regarding protected resources:

- 1. Edwards Aquifer and Conservation:** The Edwards Aquifer is closely linked to the location of conservation lands and local parks.
- 2. Parkland Dispersion:** Parkland dispersion is not equal throughout the region, nor is parkland within a reasonable walking or biking distance for most residents.
- 3. National and State Lands:** Over 5,000 acres of land are protected through conservation easements or State Park designations, such as Cibolo Bluffs Nature Preserve, Guadalupe River State Park, and Canyon Lake Gorge.
- 4. Watershed Protection:** Most protected parklands are along the Edwards Aquifer, while surface waters (other than Canyon Lake) and watersheds remain largely unprotected.

CHAPTER 3: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

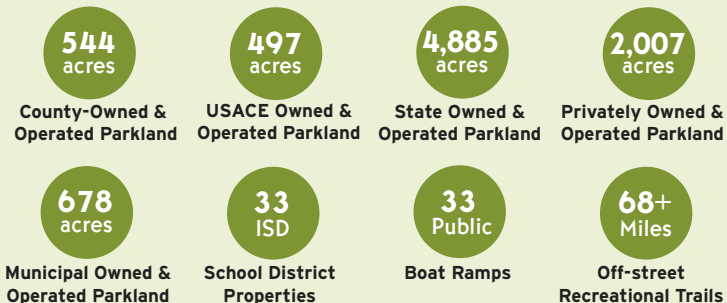
The needs assessment employs several assessments to gather information on community needs, priorities, and the existing conditions of the parks system. The POSNA utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data on community needs to achieve a comprehensive view of the current park needs. Each take a different approach - demand-based (which includes the public community survey, stakeholder meetings, and public open houses), standards-based, and resource-based – to help County and City leaders determine:

- Residents’ level of satisfaction with existing parks and recreation facilities, recreational programs, and services;
- Community needs, priorities, and preferences for various types of parks, facilities, and recreational programs;
- Gaps in parks service areas and programming; and
- Residents’ willingness and preferences to fund needed improvements, facilities, and programs.

Major highlights from public feedback and the assessments include:

- Community feedback indicates a preference for hike and bike trails, passive natural areas, and open spaces over sports facilities.
- There's a desire for increased parkland capacity, natural resource protection, and safety measures.
- Residents generally oppose higher property taxes but support county partnerships, grants, and tax incentives.
- Park sports facilities are in good condition but need minor repairs.
- Sports field improvements are needed in lighting, signage, and access within parks.
- Playground and basketball court repairs or replacements are needed.
- Limited options for non-vehicle access to parks via walking or biking.
- Comal County falls far below average in parkland and trail availability per 1,000 residents compared to similar entities.
- Residents in the far corners of the county have limited park access.
- Areas around protected lands like Honey Creek and Bracken Cave offer natural resource opportunities.
- The Guadalupe River region between New Braunfels and Canyon Lake boasts significant natural features such as a dense tree canopy and Golden-cheeked Warbler Habitat.

Existing Parks & Facilities In Comal County 2023



CHAPTER 4: RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLEMENTATION

The five issues identified as the focus of future assessments and recommendations in this Master Plan informed the goals and recommendations summarized below.



Goal One: BALANCE DEVELOPMENT & GROWTH

- 1.1 Maximize the Impacts of Open Spaces
- 1.2 Continue to Focus on Landowner Outreach



Goal Two: LEVERAGE ADMINISTRATIVE OVERSIGHT & COLLABORATION

- 2.1 Integrate Preservation/Conservation Goals with Engineer’s Office Responsibilities
- 2.2 Refine Park Operations and Maintenance
- 2.3 Identify Finance Mechanisms to Support Parks, Open Space and Natural Areas
- 2.4 Support Conservation with Strategic Partners



Goal Three: ENHANCE RECREATIONAL CAPACITY

- 3.1 Support Park Improvements and Enhancements
- 3.2 Continue to Foster Water-based Recreational Activities



Goal Four: IMPROVE ACCESS TO PARKS & NATURAL AREAS

- 4.1 Add Park Amenities for All Users
- 4.2 Strengthen Communication with Local Governmental Entities Operating Parks



Goal Five: ADD ACREAGE TO PROTECT CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES AND PRESERVE BIODIVERSITY

- 5.1 Policy-Based Protections
- 5.2 Land-Based Protections

Comal County acknowledges its limitations in terms of resources and authority over important land use issues, and its role in implementing the Master Plan will involve leading a few identified priorities and providing a supporting role with most others.

Chapter 4 outlines strategies for the County to aid in the acquisition of parkland, which can involve fee simple acquisition and conservation easements through collaboration with landowners, governmental and quasi-governmental agencies, and non-profit entities. To prioritize parcels and landowners, an assessment criterion and scoring system, based on the Parkland Service Area and Resource-based Assessment, is also provided to help identify the most suitable areas for parkland.

A high-level review of parkland operations and maintenance of sports parks is provided which lays out the benefits and challenges for county-operated, privately-operated, or hybrid-operation approaches.

A review of funding sources is provided highlighting key collaboration opportunities, use agreements, grants, and funding entities.

In conclusion, the Comal County Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas Master Plan sets forth a path to address County constraints and objectives alongside community aspirations, creating a strategy for collaboration between the County, partners, and the community.

