



A Master Plan for Parks, Open Space & Natural Areas for Comal County



Draft March 2024
Comal County, Texas

RECORD OF COMMISSIONERS COURT ACTION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Master Plan for Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas for Comal County was developed by Comal County with the technical assistance of Halff, Inc. A special thanks goes out to the many residents, landowners, community organizations, community leaders and others for their insight and support throughout the duration of this study. The following individuals are recognized for their significant contributions to the preparation of A Master Plan for Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas for Comal County:

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Executive Summary

What is the Master Plan?

Parks, open space, and natural areas, in conjunction with facilities and recreational programming, provide multiple benefits for a community and its residents. As places, parks and recreational facilities enhance the quality of life for people by providing access to green space where they can exercise and play, and even decompress from a stressful day. These opportunities can greatly contribute to the overall physical and mental wellbeing of a community's populus. The societal benefits can also be both economic and aesthetic. Parks and recreation facilities and attractions, like sports parks, Canyon Lake and the Comal and Guadalupe Rivers, are economic drivers that greatly contribute to the area's economy through millions of visits each year by those from somewhere else. Parks can contribute to the visual quality and attractiveness of a community by providing a needed departure from the hard, angular conditions which compose a community's built environment.

A master plan, for any entity engaged in contributing to the benefits listed above, is an effective and necessary tool to better ensure that these benefits are realized.

A *Master Plan for Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas for Comal County* 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 its 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.

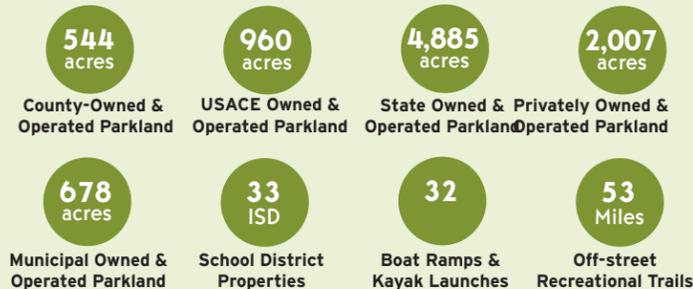
Project Purpose

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

Process

The approach to the creation of this master plan was based upon Halff's tried and true methods for park system planning. Any good planning effort will begin with an understanding of the existing conditions and the desires of the community through investigation and public engagement. From there a specific vision is created with specific goals identified. Lastly comes strategies for implementation.

Existing Parks & Facilities In Comal County 2023



Public Engagement

Robust public engagement is perhaps the most important component of a planning effort like this. The ability to demonstrate that ample opportunities were provided for Comal County residents to give their input on needs and priorities, and that the specific tools used to gather input were successful in gaining participation, serves to validate the goals presented in this report. Halff utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data on community needs to achieve a comprehensive view of what those needs are as they relate to parks, open space and natural areas. The Demand-Based Approach, which included the public community surveys (statistically-valid and general), stakeholder and group listening sessions, and public open houses resulted in both the ample provision of opportunities to "be heard" and a better than typical participation by the community members. Summary of participation:

- Community Surveys – Statistically-Valid: 518 qualified responses (400 required); General: 1,014 responses
- Stakeholder and Group Listening Sessions – Eight (8) total sessions/meetings with members of the Commissioners Court, County Staff and interested groups like Water Oriented Recreational District (WORD), Comal County Conservation Alliance (CCCA), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Canyon Lake Resources & Recreation Center (CRRC) and Parks Maintenance and Improvement Committee (PMAIC).
- Community Open Houses – Total of four (4), with a total of 223 participants "signed-in" with greater than 200 of these being unique individuals only attending one open house.

Document Organization

This Master Plan Report presents the goals and implementation, which are the most important components of a plan like this. The associated appendices are the background and supporting information used to create the report.

Top 4 Insights Regarding Protected Resources:

- Edwards Aquifer and Conservation:** The Edwards Aquifer is closely linked to the location of conservation lands and local parks.
- Parkland Dispersion:** Parkland dispersion is not equal throughout the region.
- 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.
- Watershed Protection:** Most protected parklands are along the Edwards Aquifer, while surface waters (other than Canyon Lake) and watersheds remain largely unprotected.

Master Plan Vision

The Master Plan vision establishes 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.



Goal One: BALANCING DEVELOPMENT & CONSERVATION THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE OVERSIGHT AND COLLABORATION

- 1.1 Maximize the Impacts of Open Spaces
- 1.2 Continue to Focus on Landowner Outreach
- 1.3 Integrate Preservation/Conservation Goals with Engineer's Office Responsibilities
- 1.4 Park Operations and Maintenance
- 1.5 Identify Finance Mechanisms to Support Parks, Open Space and Natural Areas
- 1.6 Support Conservation with Strategic Partners
- 1.7 Policy-Based Protections



Goal Two: ENHANCE RECREATIONAL CAPACITY

- 2.1 Support Park Improvements and Enhancements
- 2.2 Continue to Foster Water-based Recreational Activities



Goal Three: IMPROVE ACCESS TO PARKS & NATURAL AREAS

- 3.1 Add Park Amenities for All Users
- 3.2 Strengthen Communication with Local Governmental Entities Operating Parks

Importance of Parks Planning

The provision of parks, recreational spaces, natural areas, and open spaces, has a profound effect on local residents, the environment, 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.



Implementation

Comal County does not have endless resources and its authority over many of the prominent issues that its residents are concerned with is limited. Because of this, Comal County's role in the implementation of this Master Plan will primarily be to act as the "driver" for a few identified priorities and work as a "facilitator" for most. Both of these relationships will require an increase in its commitment of resources and effort to accomplish the recreational growth and development of the County and to effectively manage and maintain programs and amenities. The County has already found success in the role of "facilitator" and should continue to build connections between other entities and private landowners to conserve sensitive lands and develop projects and initiatives related to parks, open spaces and natural areas.

Much of this Master Plan's proposed actions, strategies, and projects will involve close coordination with federal and state entities such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, WORD, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Department of Transportation and other entities such as the Hill Country Alliance, Comal County Conservation Alliance, Comal Trails Alliance, and The Great Springs Project.



Headwaters at the Comal giving a site tour of the Comal Springs restoration park site
Source: Headwaters at the Comal



Residential development in Comal County providing HOA private greenspace to residents
Source: Phyllis Browning Company



Comal River Tubing
Source: My San Antonio



Canyon Lake
Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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- B. I Appendix B - Needs Assessment
- C. I Appendix C - Organization Inventory
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- E. I Appendix E - Public Engagement

DAS LEBEN IST SCHÖN
LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

INTRODUCTION

In August 2022, Comal County engaged Halff, Inc. to prepare a countywide Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas Master Plan (Master Plan). This Master Plan is one that identifies and summarizes existing conditions and the strategic needs of the County with regard to parkland and natural areas. Informed by a robust public engagement and planning process, the strategies and recommendations provided in the plan can be utilized at the discretion of the County and its partners to preserve and enhance the parkland, recreational facilities, and natural areas that serve the residents of Comal County.

BACKGROUND

Comal County is generally located along the Interstate 35 corridor, between San Antonio (Bexar County) and Austin (Travis County), which are two of the largest cities in Texas. As a result, the County is experiencing significant growth. As Comal County continues to grow in population and subsequent development, there is increasing interest in more strategic and concerted planning for parks, recreational facilities, and unprogrammed natural areas. Between 2000 and 2020, Comal County population grew by over 107 percent, and was the third fastest growing county in Texas (U.S. Census 2020). Over 55 percent of this new growth has occurred in the unincorporated (non-municipality) areas of the County. Residents of these unincorporated areas rely on neighboring municipalities and the County to meet their parks and recreational needs. Since the majority of the rural land in Comal County is either undeveloped and forested or former ranchland, new residential development poses a risk to the quality of existing natural landscapes and the environmental assets therein.

PURPOSE

Parks, open space areas, and trails, in conjunction with facilities and recreational programming, provide multiple benefits for a community and its residents. Parks and recreational facilities serve as places that enhance the quality of life for people by providing access to green space where they can exercise, play, and even decompress from a stressful day.

The benefits are not just societal and economic but can also be aesthetic. Parks can contribute to the visual quality and attractiveness of a community by providing a needed departure from the hard, angular conditions which compose a community's built environment.

APPROACH

The approach to the creation of this master plan was based upon Halff's tried and true methods for park planning. Any good planning effort will begin with an understanding of the existing conditions and the desires of the community through investigation and engagement. From there a specific vision is created with specific goals identified. Lastly comes strategies for implementation. This Master Plan report presents the goals and implementation, which are the most important components of a plan like this. The associated appendices are the background and supporting information used to create the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At this point in time, Comal County stands at a crossroads, facing the pivotal task of charting the course that will guide the future of Comal County's parks and natural spaces. Past County park master plans focused on enhancing and improving specific elements within the parks, and this emphasis remains significant. However, as the 2024 Master Plan reaches its culmination, it ushers in a renewed perspective and a new era marked by rapid growth, scarce resources, and a determination to safeguard the limited remaining open space.

The Master Plan not only acknowledges the constraints and fundamental objectives of the County, but also endeavors to align them with the community's aspirations. This momentous crossroads is no longer just a geographical point but a testament to the unity and commitment of a community forging a legacy of stewardship and well-being.

What will this Master Plan Accomplish?

The purpose of this Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas Master Plan is to begin to bring together public, quasi-public, and private sector interests so that they are all "on the same page" with regard to the programming and provision of parks, facilities, environmental preservation, and recreational programs for the citizens of Comal County. The Master Plan will provide information, goals, and recommendations regarding the following:

- 1 Identification of desired parks, open space, and natural area improvements based on the results of the Master Plan's public engagement program
- 2 Current and future demand for park system infrastructure, considering regional trends and changing demographics
- 3 Planning for the future, based on projected population growth, increased development, and new geographic areas where growth is taking place (predominantly surrounding Bulverde, New Braunfels, and Canyon Lake)
- 4 Enhanced connectivity with regard to opportunities to expand existing trail systems that link parks and natural areas with community destinations, such as schools, places of work, and neighborhoods
- 5 Current and future operations and maintenance of recreational assets (parklands, facilities, staffing, and equipment)
- 6 Enhanced resilience by preserving open space and natural areas which can mitigate flooding and reduce risk and damage to homes and property
- 7 Promoting partnerships between the County, municipalities, and local and regional organizations
- 8 Increase competitiveness of Comal County and possibly non-governmental organizations when requesting grants and other funding by providing targeted goals and projects.

VISION

The Master Plan vision establishes 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.

MASTER PLAN GOALS

Goal ONE

Balancing Development and Conservation through Administrative Oversight and Collaboration

Goal TWO

Enhance Recreational Capacity

Goal THREE

Improve Amenities at Parks and Natural Areas

ISSUES

As Comal County continues to grow in population and experience increased development, calls for more strategic planning of parks, recreational, and natural areas have grown. Over 55 percent of the new residential growth has been in unincorporated (non-municipality) parts of the county. This means that these residents rely on neighboring municipalities and the county to meet their parks and recreational needs. Since a majority of undeveloped land in Comal County is rural, former ranchland, and/or hosts a heavy tree canopy, the new residential development poses a risk to maintaining the quality of existing natural landscapes and environmental assets. Below is a summary of five issues highlighted at the beginning of the Master Planning process by county staff and initial stakeholder meetings. These five issues were the focus of assessments and recommendation in this Master Plan.



New retail and commercial development near Bulverde at SH 281 and Singing Oaks
Source: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department



Development and Growth

- Land within Comal County, including former farmland and ranchland, is being developed at an increasingly rapid rate for residential and commercial uses.
- Parkland in Comal County is mainly provided through municipal parks, school district facilities, and parkland surrounding Canyon Lake (owned by the United States Army Corps of Engineers).
- Population growth in Comal County has increased the demand for parkland and recreational facilities.



Administrative Oversight and Controls

- Due to limits placed on county governments by state statutes, there is generally a lack of administrative and/or procedural oversight and/or direction of development.
- As a result, many non-governmental organizations (non-profits) have assumed stewardship roles on behalf of the County with regard to open space preservation, conservation of critical habitats, etc.
- The lack of control could lead to diminished environmental quality, and may ultimately result in a reduction of revenue generated from natural areas and recreational facilities due to a depletion of the quality of resources such as Canyon Lake and the Guadalupe River.



Access to Parks and Natural Areas

- The limited developed recreational facilities in the County are not readily accessible to the majority of the County's population.
- A majority of residences are not within a relatively short drive, much less walking distance, to parkland. While several homeowners' associations (HOA) park facilities exist, these mainly serve the residents of those newer subdivision developments.



Recreational Capacity

- The existing and future demand for programmed and unprogrammed recreational facilities and areas exceeds the supply.
- A large portion of recreational demand is driven by visitors from outside the County who come to visit major regional parks such as Comal Park and Canyon Park.
- The availability of sports fields at County-owned or leased special use facilities is near capacity. Full build-out of these special use facilities will still not meet the increasing demand.
- Existing recreational facilities and boat ramps are experiencing deteriorating conditions due to the high number of users.
- Existing County-owned parkland does not provide recreational facilities beyond sports courts, sports fields, and walking trails.



Critical Resource Protection and Loss of Biodiversity

- As a result of increasing development, there is a net loss of high-quality aquatic and terrestrial habitat and available open space of sufficient quality to accommodate flora and fauna species diversity.
- The County's limited regulatory authority cannot prevent development which may impact the existing ecosystems.
- The largest swaths of protected parkland in Comal County are owned and operated through conservation easements or through Texas Parks and Wildlife Department state parks (Guadalupe State Park, Honey Creek Natural Area, Cibolo Bluffs Preserve, etc.).

WHAT IS A PARK VS. OPEN SPACE VS. NATURAL AREA

PARK

A park is a publicly available space with recreational and nature-based facilities, such as playgrounds, sports fields, ball courts, trails, fishing docks, amphitheaters, skateparks, splashpads, pool, etc.



Hidden Valley Sports Complex Source: Half

OPEN SPACE

Open spaces are areas that can host more passive activities such as picnicking, relaxation, farmer's markets, or can be land that is left undeveloped in order to serve other purposes like stormwater detention and treatment or compatibility buffers.



Comal Park Source: Comal Conservation Alliance

NATURAL AREA

Natural areas are based around vegetation and water with minimal to no focus placed on recreational facilities. Natural areas often include trails, bird watching zones, fishing piers, and mountain bike trails.



Honey Creek State Natural Area Source: Sean Poynter

CONSERVATION LANDS

Conservation lands, often labeled as preserves or reserves, are public or privately owned lands in which the native and natural habitat is the main land use and where almost no development can occur.



Cibolo Bluffs Nature Preserve Source: The Nature Conservancy



Goal One: BALANCING DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION THOROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE OVERSIGHT AND COLLABORATION

Comal County's rural character and atmosphere has been a magnet in drawing more and more residents and visitors to the County. The beauty of the Hill Country landscape, aesthetics and ambiance all contribute to its allure. As a result of these natural blessings, the County will witness a continuing trend reflected in increased population, business and economic development, and the subsequent pressures that are being placed on infrastructure, schools, housing stock, police and fire protection, natural resources, and the environment.

Presently, the County manages the planning and construction of roads, bridges, and existing parks. The County manages parks and open spaces through the County Engineer's Office with maintenance and volunteer contracts, which has served the County well. However, as the County grows and demands increase, the use of volunteers becomes a more difficult mechanism for the management of parks. Any acquisition and/or development of land for open space, parks and natural areas will require a more complex and increased commitment on the part of the County to maintain, manage and operate the facilities and programs that may take place on these properties.

As a whole, the County shares the impacts of growth with other local government jurisdictions within its boundaries. County land use regulations are limited; however, throughout the public engagement process there was a clear desire from participants and residents to preserve some undeveloped spaces in Comal County.

It is reasonable to assume that the County is not yet ready to fund and manage new park and open space properties. In the meantime, there are some limited things that the County can do through policies and budgeting that can advance opportunities to preserve open space and natural areas.

1.1 Maximize the Impacts of Open Spaces

- Develop criteria to identify critical habitats, parcels of land, and other resources to be assessed regularly and compared with developed land. (See Page 1.15 Property Prioritization)
- Promote protection and conservation of environmentally constrained lands and important natural resources by identifying areas such as key scenic views as seen from roadsides, parks, waterfronts, and other areas frequented by the public.
- Develop a "Comal County Green Spaces Map" through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) assessment to show areas with high priority for preservation based on criteria developed by the County and partners.
- Continue to refine the County's Public Improvement District (PID) Policy to encourage the establishment of open spaces in subdivisions. Include specific criteria by which the benefits of the PID may be measured (i.e., quality of open space and per capita size).

1.2 Continue to Focus on Landowner Outreach

- Develop a comprehensive, landowner-centered outreach covering vital topics such as deed restrictions, water resources, endangered species, historical and cultural significance, proximity to existing parks and trails, and effective conservation-oriented sales strategies.
- Facilitate landowners' access to resources that empower them to effectively preserve their valuable land and support the process by incorporating strategies to maximize the potential for a successful land sale, ensuring that both preservation and financial objectives are met seamlessly.
- Recognize existing landowners' efforts (conservation easements, bird counts and reports, periodic public access) to preserve open spaces, protect critical habitat (i.e., proclamations during Great Outdoors Month (June) or Parks and Recreation month (July)).

1.3 Integrate Preservation/Conservation Goals with Engineer's Office Responsibilities

- Explore the possibility of joint management/operation of County parks with the Water-Oriented Recreational District (WORD).
- Incorporate "Natural Areas" into the name of the Parks Department to reflect and acknowledge the County's park administration efforts towards more than sports recreation facilities (Jumbo Evans and Hidden Valley Sports Parks).
- Explore the possibility of joint management/operation of County boat ramps with WORD.
- Continue to pursue regulations, monitoring, and education for park visitors to prevent environmental damage or mistreatment.
- Use the Natural Resources Map, presented on page B.38, to raise awareness for protection and conservation of environmentally sensitive lands and important natural resources for new development.
- Seek legislation that promotes conservation principles and land rights and allows for open space acquisition, preservation and development of natural areas that adjoin other like parcels to create larger areas of contiguous open space.
- Identify a County employee, or consider the option to contract with a local group, to serve as liaison to conservation groups and to monitor land conservation activities in the County.
- Incorporate nature-based engineering solutions, such as bioswales and drainage vegetation, into road and stormwater designs across County properties and projects to protect ground and surface water, reduce flooding, preserve tree canopies, riparian vegetation, soils, and waterways, thereby enhancing green spaces on County projects

1.4 Park Operations and Maintenance

- Continue to support the volunteers that manage the operations and maintenance of sports fields and other natural areas.
- Develop, in conjunction with volunteer groups, a system to document volunteer hours to promote their value and foster transparency.
- Develop an Operations and Maintenance Plan for County Parks and Open Spaces that includes best management practices that will maximize the effectiveness of the limited County resources.
- Continue to monitor effectiveness of volunteer based operations and maintenance and adjust as needed.

1.5 Identify Finance Mechanisms to Support Parks, Open Space and Natural Areas

- Continue to use Public Improvement Districts (PIDs) as a mechanism for developers to protect and conserve open spaces, develop and improve parks, and improve other infrastructure that positively impacts the environment.
- Pursue grants to enhance and improve existing parks and boat ramps with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Pursue grants with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) for open space land acquisition in conjunction with the Comal County Regional Habitat Conservation Plan.
- Collaborate with partners to actively seek philanthropic funding opportunities, enabling expedited acquisition of natural areas.
- Consider creating an ad hoc committee or working group comprised of both County officials and general residents to study the financing options available and gauge potential support.
- Consider leveraging financing options with philanthropic grants, state grants, and Texas Water Development Board's State-wide Revolving Fund Program.

1.6 Support Conservation with Strategic Partners

- Receive input from land conservation entities to provide assistance that will identify opportunities and facilitate conservation and preservation.
- Identify open space preservation strategies that can share benefits with other core county functions where applicable (i.e. roads, stormwater, etc.).
- Collaborate with the partners identified in Appendix C to identify opportunities to support conservation.

1.7 Policy-Based Protections

- Support State of Texas and municipal policies and plans that protect natural areas and open spaces while balancing the growth demands and private property rights.
- Support policies (local, state and federal) that encourage landowners to voluntarily enter into conservation easements in order to receive income/estate tax benefits or other incentives in exchange for preserving the land.
- Explore the creation of a land trust or bank using transfer of development rights, land acquisition and donations with land conservation groups.

Idea: Landowners Workshops

This workshop can be paired with mailing out postcards that share some of the available resources to landowners who desire to protect sensitive lands.

Collaborating with partners, the County can organize workshops for landowners that operate as on-site field trips connecting them with professionals, such as arborists, biologists, and watershed experts. These experts can assist in identifying key characteristics, resources, and potential threats, aiding landowners in recognizing preservation needs and establishing effective monitoring practices. These workshops, complemented by the distribution of informative postcards, serve as a holistic approach to empower

landowners who wish to safeguard sensitive land by offering valuable resources and insights to enhance their understanding of conservation-oriented land and easement transactions.



Land Stewardship Ranch Tour provided by the Hill Country Conservancy
Source: Hill Country Conservancy

Idea: Implement Nature-based Engineering Solutions on County Lands

Nature-based solutions or low-impact design (LID) are where natural environmental functions are incorporated into the infrastructure design of drainage systems, roadways, and structures. The goal of LID is to reduce polluted runoff and long-term maintenance for infrastructure and provide a more visually attractive alternative to traditional hardscape designs. To the right, are examples of LID solutions.

Bioswales & Natural Drainage



Source: HR Green

Permeable/Alternative Surfaces



Source: Skagit Conservation Dist.



Goal Two: ENHANCE RECREATIONAL CAPACITY

As a thriving hub for residence, employment, and recreation, Comal County has key elements for a high quality of life. Its picturesque landscape, rivers, and natural areas have created ideal Hill Country settings for Bulverde, Fair Oaks Ranch, Garden Ridge, New Braunfels, Spring Branch, and Schertz, along with special areas like Gruene, Canyon Lake, Sattler, and Fischer. Recognizing the pivotal role recreation plays in promoting physical and mental well-being, there is a pressing need to enhance recreational capacity to accommodate the County's growth. Accessible and convenient recreational facilities are essential for all groups of residents and visitors, including the youth, elderly and physically disabled. Moreover, in Comal County, the thriving ecotourism industry and associated recreational activities contribute significantly to economic prosperity. Prioritizing recreational infrastructure development will not only support the well-being of the community but also cater to the increased demands spurred by the County's growth.

2.1 Support Park Improvements and Enhancements

- Continue to serve the demand and future needs of local leagues and sports tourists through county-owned sports fields, recreational complexes, and special use facilities.
- Formulate a five-year capital improvement plan that prioritizes park accessibility and maintenance of existing facilities.
- Continue adaptive management of Curry Park, Kleck Park, and the Morton Tract, and others as needed.
- Explore opportunities for parkland expansion in areas lacking park access and experiencing faster growth or with regional trail opportunities.
- Continue the County's existing policy of the phased buildout of the Master Plans for Hidden Valley Sports Park and Jumbo Evans Sports Park (see page 1.12 for more information).



Lake Raven, near Huntsville Texas, kayak rental and boat house
Source: Headwaters at the Comal

2.2 Continue to Foster Water-based Recreational Activities

- Conduct a safety assessment of boat ramps and access to determine improvement needs.
- Communicate water-recreational activities on County website with links from USACE, WORD, and other water-recreation partners.
- Periodically meet with water-recreation stakeholders and providers to discuss needs, challenges, and ways to partner to meet existing and future demand.
- Support a Texas Paddling Trail designation in coordination with WORD and other recreational agencies.



Marble Falls Lakeside Park beach, swimming zone, and trails
Source: The Highlander



Educational and interpretive signage examples along natural trails and waterways
Source: (left) The Colony Shoreline Trail, (right) Lomaki Trail- AllTrails

Idea: Online Recreational Availability Portal

Comal County, in partnership with WORD, municipalities, and other entities, should consider a single web-based app or portal for visitors and residents to access real-time information about recreational facilities and parks. The portal can be used to showcase the variety of facilities, the availability of boat ramps, controlled access park capacity, notice of trail closures, maps, promotions from local business and tourism-based entities, and provide environmental information.

Using the County Engineer's website, the portal could provide quantitative user data allowing for more strategic planning for future facilities and investments. In addition, the portal can feature a comments and feedback feature for direct communications.

Examples of similar existing web-based portals include the National Park Service phone app, state parks reservation systems, Allegheny County Parks Trails app, WORD's Visitor Guide, and the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority Trail Explorer app.



Goal Three: IMPROVE AMENITIES AT PARKS AND NATURAL AREAS

Currently, the primary mode of transportation to parks and trails in Comal County is by personal vehicle. As the County's population increases and additional development and roadway projects occur, sidewalk and trail access infrastructure could be added for residents and visitors. Existing trails could be considered for expansion, and parkland could connect to adjacent subdivisions by way of sidewalks and side-paths.

3.1 Add Park Amenities for All Users

- Reach out to local groups (Chambers of Commerce, civic clubs, school districts, eagle scouts) to add low-cost, low maintenance park amenities; for example picnic areas, nature watching stations and natural trails.
- Consider partnering with trail advocates and the local Chambers of Commerce to develop a Tourism and Trails master plan utilizing existing infrastructure.
- Study opportunities to connect residents to parkland by way of trails, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes with the development of residential and commercial property.

3.2 Strengthen Communication with Local Governmental Entities Operating Parks

- Conduct a survey of the local government entities to understand the challenges and opportunities to expanding access to limited-access parks, including Potters Creek, Overlook Park, Canyon Dam, Canyon Lake Gorge, and Cranes Mill Park.
- Support and monitor municipal initiatives aimed at enhancing accessibility to local parks, (i.e., partnerships, new programs and financing options).



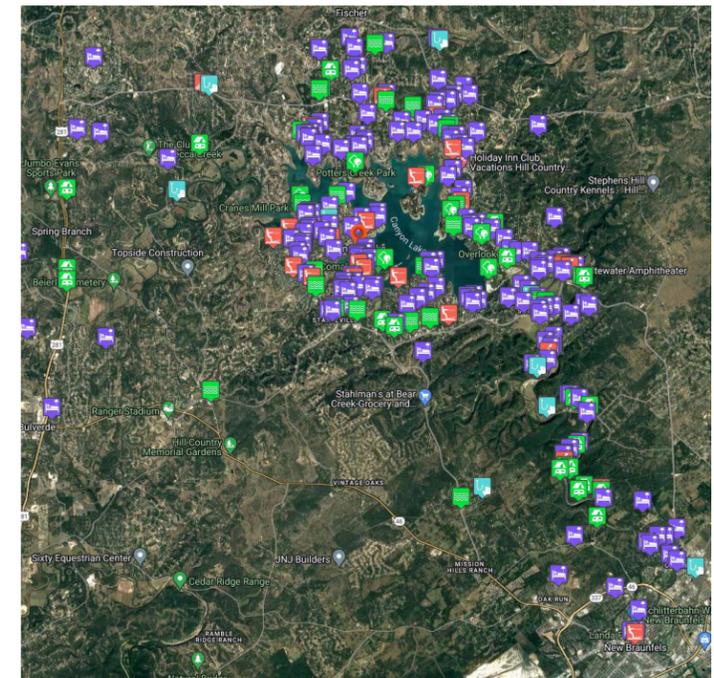
Source: SH 45SW



Source: Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority

While State Highway 45 Southwest, near Austin, was being constructed, a 10-foot wide permeable surface trail was included in the project cost to provide additional mobility alternatives in conjunction with roadway funding. As roadways are reconstructed or widened, Comal County should look to add shared-use paths along roadway projects.

According to the Trust for Public Land's Park Serve 10-Minute Walk Program data:



The above map is the Water Oriented Recreation District's online Visitor's Guide web portal which depicts recreational locations, assets, and hotels.
Source: WORD



IMPLEMENTATION

Comal County does not have endless resources and its authority over many of the important issues that its residents are concerned with is limited. Because of this, Comal County's role in the implementation of this Master Plan will primarily be to act as the "driver" for a few identified priorities and work as a "facilitator" for most. Both of these relationships will require an increase in its commitment of resources and effort to accomplish the recreational growth and development of the County and to effectively manage and maintain programs and amenities. The County has already found success in the role of "facilitator" and should continue to build connections between other entities and private landowners to conserve sensitive lands and develop projects and initiatives related to parks, open spaces and natural areas.

Much of this Master Plan's proposed actions, strategies, and projects will involve close coordination with federal and state entities such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, WORD, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Department of Transportation and other entities such as the Hill Country Alliance, Comal County Conservation Alliance, Comal Trails Alliance, and The Great Springs Project (as detailed on page A.46).

Sports Parks Phased Build-out

The Comal County Parks Maintenance and Improvement Committee (PMAIC) prepared a Recreational Master Plan that was approved and adopted by the Commissioners Court in December of 2010. That plan included the following priorities for development:

- Construction of additional playing fields/courts for organized sports
- Construction of picnic areas
- Construction of hike/bike trails
- Construction of playscape areas
- Construction of an amphitheater stage

Based on input received during both the individual group meetings and the public meetings, there is still demand for the "build-out" of Hidden Valley and Jumbo Evans Sports Parks in accordance with the individual park master plans and approved Contributing Zone Plans.

We recommend a phased approach for sports park improvements and build out as funding becomes available.

Hidden Valley Sports Park Master Plan Build-out

The outstanding items listed in the 2010 Master Plan are several pavilions, the amphitheater stage with patio area, and two trailhead access points at the 1-mile loop trail near Field 1 and Field 6. The pavilions and amphitheater with patio area did not come up in any of the discussions with park users, at the public meetings nor with the PMAIC. The loop trail was again identified as a need during at least one of the public meetings and was described as an opportunity to provide a safe walking facility for area residents. Improved parking was also identified as a need and addressed in the Parks Conditions Assessments. Rough order of magnitude costs for those improvements can be seen below.

Hidden Valley Missing Facilities	Number of Facilities	Order of Magnitude Costs (Plus 20% Contingency)
Stage and Patio	N/A	\$720,000
Buildings 2 and 3	2	\$1,080,000
Building 8	1	\$600,000
Lighting	18	\$3,576,655*
Totals		\$5,976,655

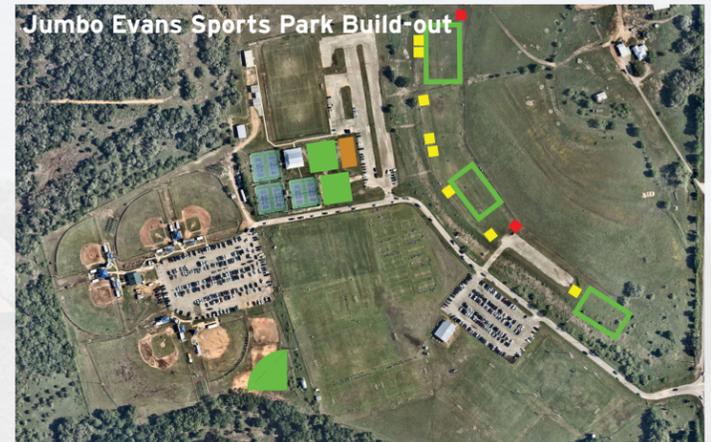
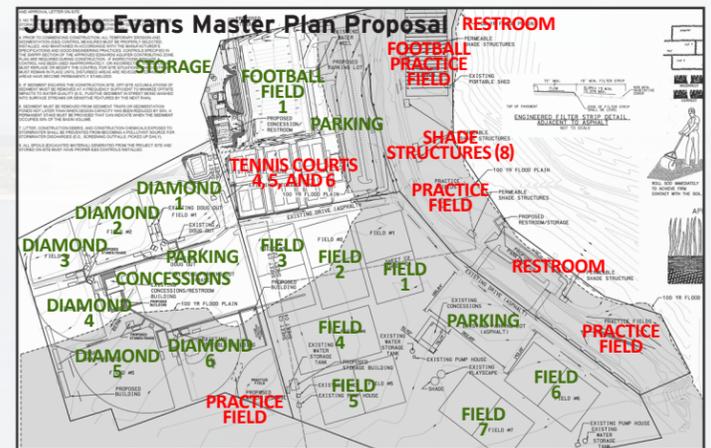
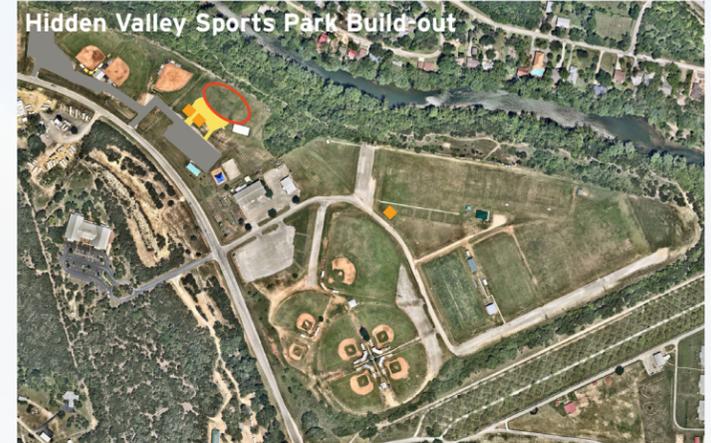
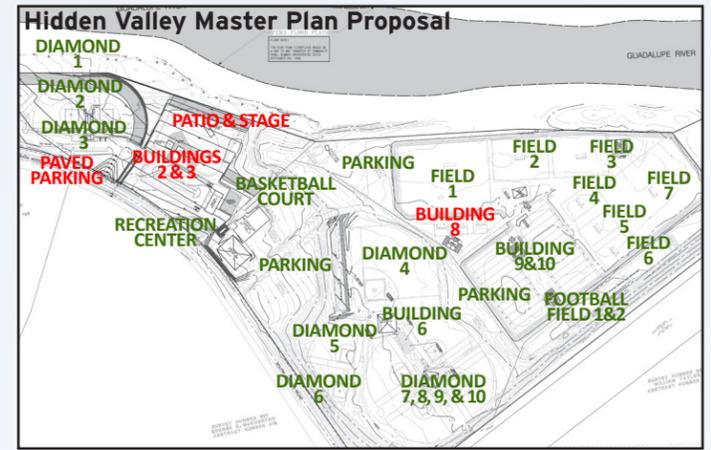
* Cost estimate received from Comal County and M&S Engineering

Jumbo Evans Sports Park Master Plan Build-out

The outstanding items listed in the 2010 Master Plan are more extensive than at Hidden Valley Sports Park and include additional tennis courts, numerous practice fields, a restroom facility and shade structures. While pickleball courts were one of the main topics of discussion at the public meetings, discussions with the PMAIC included both tennis and pickleball courts and the need for more sports fields to accommodate growing youth sports programs. Rough order of magnitude costs for those improvements can be seen below.

Jumbo Evans Missing Facilities	Number of Facilities	Order of Magnitude Costs (Plus 20% Contingency)
Diamond practice field	1	\$300,000
Tennis / Pickleball Courts	6	\$720,000
Turf practice field	3	\$720,000
Restroom / Storage	2	\$600,000
Shade Structure	8	\$720,000
Lighting	6	\$1,518,716*
Totals		\$4,578,716

* Cost estimate received from Comal County and M&S Engineering



Sports Parks Operations and Maintenance

A recreational athletic facility can be one of the most complex and expensive facilities when it comes to operations and maintenance. The use is typically exponentially higher than other types of parks and facilities, they contain amenities that demand specialized maintenance regimens and equipment, and the user usually has an expectation of quality that exceeds what many entities provide. Comal County has been quite successful in its operations of both Hidden Valley and Jumbo Evans Sports Parks with its fairly unique operations and maintenance model. The Parks Maintenance and Improvement Committee (PMAIC), a collection of representatives from park user groups formed in 2007, and the County have over time both improved and maintained both Hidden Valley and Jumbo Evans Sports Parks to the great benefit of the County residents that have used these parks.

While this operations and maintenance model has been very effective for the last 15+ years, population growth and associated increased demand for sports programming space and time will make this model much harder to sustain in the future. The biggest concern is that this model relies heavily on volunteer labor for large scale operations and maintenance. Despite this concern, we see that most are willing to contribute in other ways than time. Many see it better to financially support these activities than to dedicate the time.

Three Approaches to Operations and Maintenance

Comal County is approaching a crossroads of sorts where a decision will need to be made on how best to support these facilities. This decision is not one that must be made in the near term, but the pressures are only going to increase. Here are some things to consider:

There are two main models for these types of operations and maintenance (“public” and “private”). **Public** is best described as the governmental entity is responsible for the activities, while **private** is where a non-profit user group or collection of groups or even a private for-profit company is responsible. Deciding between public and private operations and maintenance for public parks depends on various factors, including budget constraints, efficiency goals, accountability, and the specific needs of the community. A third type is a **hybrid** approach which takes the most appropriate pieces of public and private and combines them into a unique solution for the County.

Each of the options have their advantages and disadvantages as outlined on the following page.

County Operations & Maintenance

Benefits:

County Control: Public maintenance operations are directly accountable to the local government and, by extension, the community. This can lead to a strong sense of ownership and alignment with community values.

Transparency: Public operations are subject to public scrutiny and transparency requirements, which can foster trust and accountability.

Stability: Public funding can provide a stable budget for park maintenance, reducing the risk of sudden cuts.

Public Interest Focus: Public agencies often prioritize public interest and long-term community well-being over profit

Challenges:

Bureaucracy: Public operations can be subjected to bureaucratic processes that might slow decision-making and flexibility.

Budget Constraints: Public funding might be limited, leading to challenges in keeping up with maintenance needs, upgrades, and new developments.

Resource Allocation: Budgets might be allocated to parks based on political factors rather than actual needs.

Volunteer Operations & Maintenance

Benefits:

Efficiency: Private groups might be more efficient in some cases due to their singular focus or even profit-driven nature. They might have incentives to optimize resources and minimize costs.

Expertise: Private groups may be best suited to bring specialized expertise in park management, landscaping, and facility maintenance.

Flexibility: Private groups might have more flexibility to adapt quickly to changing needs and emerging trends.

Innovation: Private groups might bring innovative approaches to park management and programming.

Challenges:

Profit Motive: Private groups are driven by a singular focus or even profit, which could potentially lead to prioritizing cost-cutting over long-term quality and greater community needs.

Accountability: There might be concerns about private groups prioritizing profit over community needs and potentially cutting corners.

Loss of Community Control: Some communities might feel that privatization leads to a loss of local control and input over park operations.

Quality Concerns: Depending on contract terms and oversight, there might be concerns about maintaining the same level of quality and care as public operations.

The Hybrid Approach

In many cases, a hybrid approach that combines public oversight with volunteer expertise can be effective. For example, volunteers could perform certain services like landscaping and maintenance while the County retains control over strategic decisions and major park developments. Ultimately, the decision should be based on a thorough analysis of the specific needs, resources, and priorities of the community, along with careful consideration of the potential benefits and drawbacks of each approach.

Regardless of approach and even with the current model, there are some Best Management Practices (BMP’s) that can reduce the cost of on-going operations and maintenance:

Regular Maintenance: Implement a regular maintenance schedule for landscaping, facilities, and equipment to ensure that the parks remain safe and attractive. This includes mowing, pruning, trash collection, and facility inspection.

Expand Volunteer Programs: Establish volunteer programs that allow community members to contribute to park maintenance, gardening, and event coordination. Volunteers can be a valuable resource to supplement staff efforts.

Ecological Preservation: Designate areas within the parks for wildlife habitat and native plant restoration. Implement sustainable landscaping practices that minimize the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Partnerships: Collaborate with volunteer organizations for maintenance support. Partnerships can help share resources and expertise.

Budgeting and Funding: Develop a sustainable funding strategy that includes a combination of government funding, grants, user fees, sponsorships, and donations.

Technology Integration: Implement technology solutions like online reservation systems for facilities, mobile apps for event notifications, and digital signage for wayfinding.

Adaptive Management: Regularly review and adjust park management strategies based on community feedback, changing needs, and emerging trends.



Community garden at Hidden Valley Sports Park operated by the Canyon Lake Resource and Recreation Center
Source: Half

Property Prioritization Criteria

The strategies and recommendations included in this report highlight multiple opportunities for the County to aid in the acquisition and establishment of parkland and conservation lands, either through outright fee simple acquisition, conservation easement acquisition or a combination of the two. The County should look to partnerships with individual landowners and other groups that are focused on the same goals like governmental, quasi-governmental and non-profit entities. Below is a list of assessment criteria and scoring to help County officials identify parcels and landowners best suited for parkland establishment and conservation efforts. The assessment criteria is based off the Parkland Service Area assessment, on page B.26, and the Resource-based Assessment on page B.37. Out of a total possible score of 100, each criteria has a set weighted score; the higher the score (the more criteria met), the higher the parcel or land priority should be. Note that scoring can and should be adjusted based on the needs of the assessment entity and project priorities.

45/100 SENSITIVITY

- 5 Is the parcel over the Edwards Aquifer and recharge zone?
- 5 Does the parcel have significant existing tree canopy?
- 5 Does the parcel house protected or listed species?
- 5 Is the parcel located along a waterway, at a river's headwaters, or confluence of waterways?
- 5 Is the parcel located within a floodplain?
- 5 Does the parcel have underground caves or karst topography?
- 5 Does the parcel hold significant cultural or historical value?
- 5 Does the parcel hold preexisting development restrictions or parameters limiting its potential for commercial or residential development?
- 5 Does the alternative development of the parcel have the potential to increase erosion, run off, wildfires, or flooding issues in the future?

##/45

25/100 PROXIMITY

- 5 Is the parcel adjacent or close to existing parkland, recreation, or conservation land?
- 5 Is the parcel highly visible from major roadways and provide opportunity for vistas and sightline observation areas?
- 5 Is the parcel part of a contiguous natural landscape or environmental corridor?
- 5 Is the parcel located in an area of low level-of-service, or where existing access to parkland and natural areas is limited for residents?
- 5 Is the parcel located adjacent to existing community centers such as libraries, schools, public governmental facilities, non-profit centers, or recreation centers?

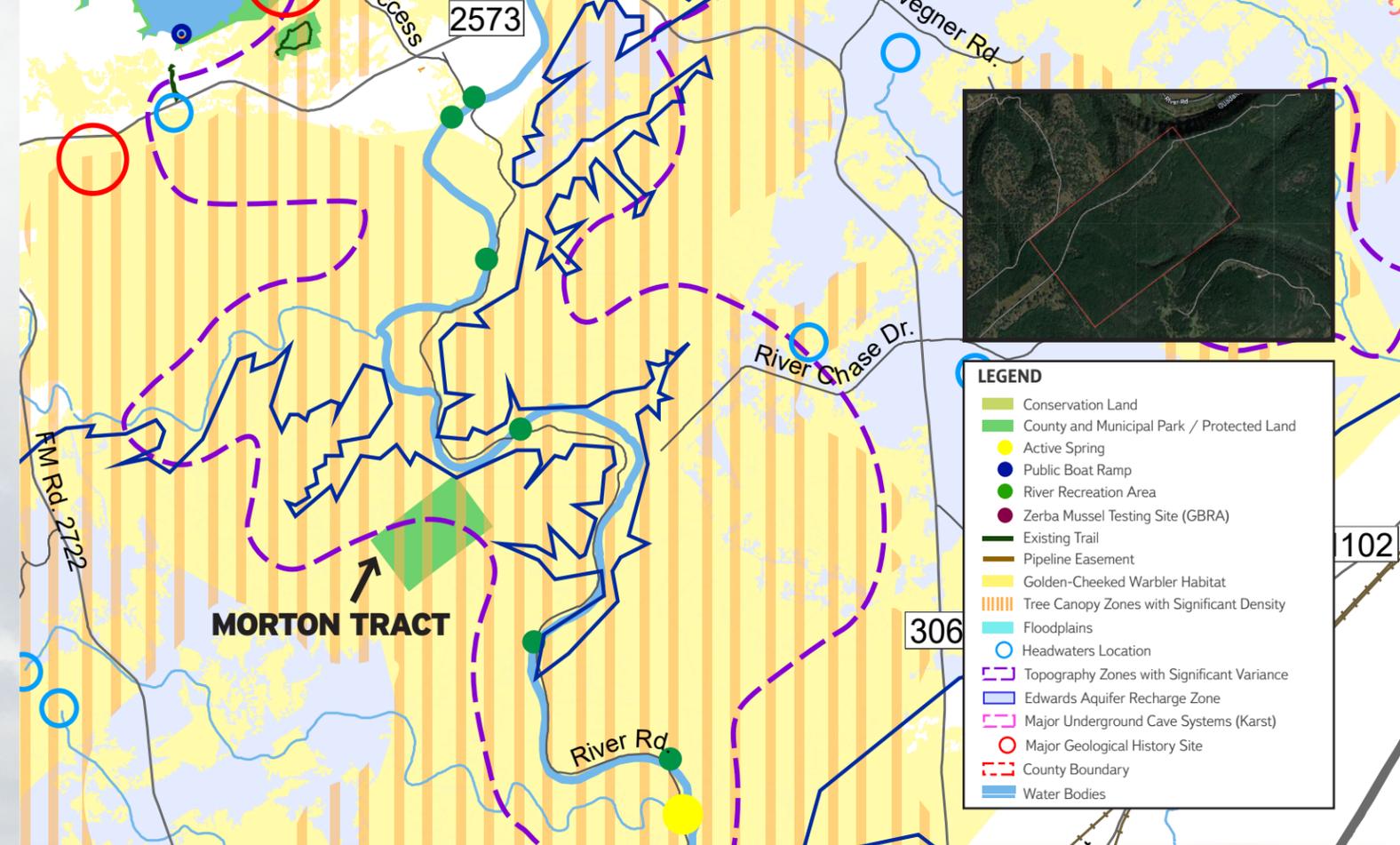
##/25

30/100 ACCESS & DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

- 5 Is the parcel adjacent to existing residential concentrations?
- 5 Is the parcel connected by existing trails and sidewalks?
- 5 Is the parcel at least 50 acres or a size of significant value?
- 5 Can the parcel provide a water access point or programmed water-based recreational elements?
- 5 Is the parcel located within an area that opens opportunities to receive additional funding from state or federal agencies?
- 5 Is the parcel located at a high or low elevation relative to its surrounding lands (which can impact drainage)?

##/30

Total Score: ##/100



Example Property Criteria Assessment for the County-owned Morton Tract

SENSITIVITY

- 5 Is the parcel over the Edwards Aquifer and recharge zone?
- 5 Does the parcel have significant existing tree canopy?
- 5 Does the parcel house protected or listed species?
- 5 Is the parcel located along a waterway, at a river's headwaters, or confluence of waterways?
- 5 Is the parcel located within a flood plain?
- 5 Does the parcel have underground caves or karst topography?
- 5 Does the parcel hold significant cultural or historical value?
- 5 Does the parcel hold preexisting development restrictions or parameters limited its potential for commercial or residential development?
- 5 Does the alternative development of the parcel have the potential to increase erosion, run off, wildfires, or flooding issues in the future?

30/45

PROXIMITY

- 5 Is the parcel adjacent or close to existing parkland, recreation, or conservation land?
- 5 Is the parcel highly visible from major roadways and provide opportunity for vistas and sightline observation areas?
- 5 Is the parcel part of a contiguous natural landscape or environmental corridor?
- 5 Is the parcel located in an area of low level-of-service, or where existing access to parkland and natural areas is limited for residents?
- 5 Is the parcel located adjacent to existing community centers such as libraries, schools, public governmental facilities, non-profit centers, or recreation centers?

20/25

ACCESS & DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

- 5 Is the parcel adjacent to existing residential concentrations?
- 5 Is the parcel connected by existing trails and sidewalks?
- 5 Is the parcel at least 50 acres or of a size of significant value?
- 5 Can the parcel provide a water access point or programmed water-based recreational elements?
- 5 Is the parcel located within a zone that opens opportunities to receive additional funding from TPWD, the Army Corps of Engineers, or Joint-base San Antonio?
- 5 Is the parcel located at a high or low elevation point relative to its surrounding lands?

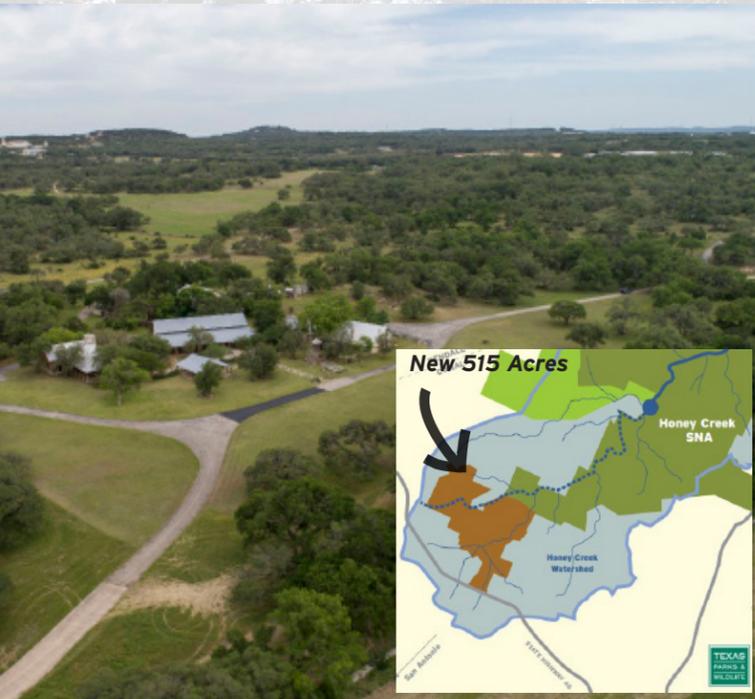
15/30

Total Score: 65/100

Most parts of Comal County will not reach a threshold of 50 points. With this criteria, a parcel with a score above 50 points is considered as potentially desirable and further research is warranted.

Funding Sources for Implementation

This section outlines funding strategies at the regional, state, and federal levels that can be utilized to implement potential projects and parkland improvements. This section includes an overview of potential partnerships and grants, including timeframe for applications, potential grant amounts, and level of effort required to apply. The following funding programs and funding methods/partnerships represent the most reliable resources for implementing potential active recreation, environmental conservation efforts, and partnerships.



The 515-Acre addition to Honey Creek State Natural Area through a partnership between The Nature Conservancy in Texas, Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, Land and Water Conservation Fund and landowners Ronnie and Terry Urbanczyk
Source: KSAT



The Sweaty Yeti trail run provided through partnership with Comal Trails Alliance and New Braunfels Parks Department at Panther Canyon Park
Source: Comal Trails Alliance

LOCAL FUNDING

Budgeting

Each year the County Commissioners adopt the County budget and outline expenditures for departments under the direct control of the court. This includes oversight and annual review of funding for County parks and recreation projects and improvements.

Bonds

Local bonds are a county method of funding specific projects through voter approved borrowing. This debt is most commonly repaid through property tax revenues to fund parkland acquisition, trails, parks improvements, roadway safety projects, and development.

Fees

Parking Fees and Boat Ramp Fees

Charging users for parking at and/or use of boat ramps will create additional revenue that can be used to offset costs associated with the operations and maintenance of the ramps. Data can also be easier collected regarding the usage of the ramps in order to understand user trends and the need for future expenditures at the ramps.

Non-Resident Fees

Another potential fee could be levied towards out-of-county residents who visit any County operated or managed park facility that may have user fees.

Water-Oriented Recreation District of Comal County (WORD)

As mentioned in the Regional and Federal Agencies Review section on page A.34, WORD is a political subdivision which is in charge of administering specific regulations and specific tax funds related to specific aspects of local tourism and is partially under the purview of the Comal County Commissioners Court. WORD receives funds from the following taxes: a three percent tax on camping, lodging, fishing guides, whitewater guides, dry and wet slip boat storage, parking for purposes of water ingress/egress, and rentals. An additional one dollar (\$1.00) fee per person is charged for river equipment rentals, river ingress/egress, and shuttles without rental. Continued partnership between WORD and the County can help to maintain and increase the services and quality of parks and recreation in the County, without major increases to the County's overall operational costs.

PARTNERSHIPS

Public, Non-Profit, and Private Partnerships

As previously mentioned on page 1.13, Sports Parks Operations and Maintenance, a hybrid approach to parks maintenance is a common way public entities can leverage limited resources and funds to help maintain and provide adequate park services. A great example of this is at Hidden Valley Sports Park, where the Canyon Lake Resource and Recreation Center operates the indoor gymnasium facility and community garden which provides the public with additional outdoor and recreational opportunities with limited direct County involvement. Sports fields agreements are another common public-private partnership that can be used to maintain and operate sports fields and facilities. Comal County currently uses these types of agreements to a certain extent but they could be modified to better offset some costs.

By joining forces with organizations dedicated to environmental conservation, the County can harness collective expertise and resources to ensure the responsible stewardship and acquisition of natural areas, as well as collaborative land management and protection. Organizations such as the Great Springs Project, Hill Country Alliance and the Nature Conservancy offer these opportunities.

Donations

Donations serve as a potential funding strategy for maintaining and preserving open spaces. By contributing financially, individuals and organizations directly support the conservation efforts necessary to safeguard parks, open space and natural areas. These donations play a pivotal role in funding various initiatives, including habitat restoration, trail maintenance, and environmental education programs. Additionally, donations can help leverage additional funding sources and community support, ensuring the long-term sustainability of open spaces for generations to come.

School District Partnerships

School districts are often major operators of indoor and outdoor sports facilities. School properties often abut residential property and are often unused during weekends and when school is out of session. Either through shared-use agreements or partnerships for community events, school properties and facilities have the potential to be utilized to fulfill temporary capacity issues for municipal or county parkland, events, or sporting events.

Local Government Partnerships

Municipalities operate parkland and facilities similar to many counties, both with the goal of providing park space, programming, and recreation to residents. Parklands within the County and in municipal ETJs can operate under shared-use agreements for parks maintenance and operation or one-time use agreements to fulfill resident's needs.

Regional Government Partnerships

River authorities and groundwater districts also operate parks, natural areas, and facilities similar to many counties, with the goals of water resources protection, flood mitigation and endangered species protection. Counties can enhance capacity by supporting these entities through shared resources, funding (i.e., direct costs, in-kind), or land acquisitions.

STATE AND FEDERAL FUNDING

State and Federal funds are often crucial funding sources counties utilize to fund park improvements and projects. Grants are offered through Texas entities such as Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), Texas Forest Service, and the General Land Office (GLO). Several federal grant programs are also available through the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Agriculture (DOA), Department of Commerce, and Department of Health and Urban Development (HUD).

Some of the major grants offered by these entities include the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (DOA), Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program (DOA), Conservation Innovation Grant (DOA), Raise Grants (DOT), Multimodal Projects Discretionary Grant (DOT), Environmental Education Grant Program (EPA), Environmental Justice Grants (EPA), Boat Sewage Pump out Grants (TPWD), Boating Access Grant (TPWD), Recreational Trails Grant (TPWD), the Landowner Incentive Program (TPWD). Local Grants through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (TPWD) and Community Development Block Grants (HUD).





CONCLUSION

In summary, the *Master Plan for Parks, Open Space, and Natural Areas for Comal County* represents not just a document outlining goals and strategies, but a testament to the community's commitment to preserving its natural beauty and enhancing its recreational opportunities. Through robust public engagement, including statistically-valid surveys, stakeholder meetings, and open houses, the voices of Comal County residents have been heard and incorporated into the plan. This approach ensured that the vision laid out in the Master Plan resonates with the diverse needs and desires of the community and fits with the purview of Comal County's authority setting a solid foundation for future park investments and conservation efforts. With three central goals guiding its strategic direction, the plan delineates a path forward for sustainable growth and stewardship.



Goal One: BALANCING DEVELOPMENT & CONSERVATION THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE OVERSIGHT AND COLLABORATION

- 1.1 Maximize the Impacts of Open Spaces
- 1.2 Continue to Focus on Landowner Outreach
- 1.3 Integrate Preservation/Conservation Goals with Engineer's Office Responsibilities
- 1.4 Park Operations and Maintenance
- 1.5 Identify Finance Mechanisms to Support Parks, Open Space and Natural Areas
- 1.6 Support Conservation with Strategic Partners
- 1.7 Policy-Based Protections



Goal Two: ENHANCE RECREATIONAL CAPACITY

- 2.1 Support Park Improvements and Enhancements
- 2.2 Continue to Foster Water-based Recreational Activities

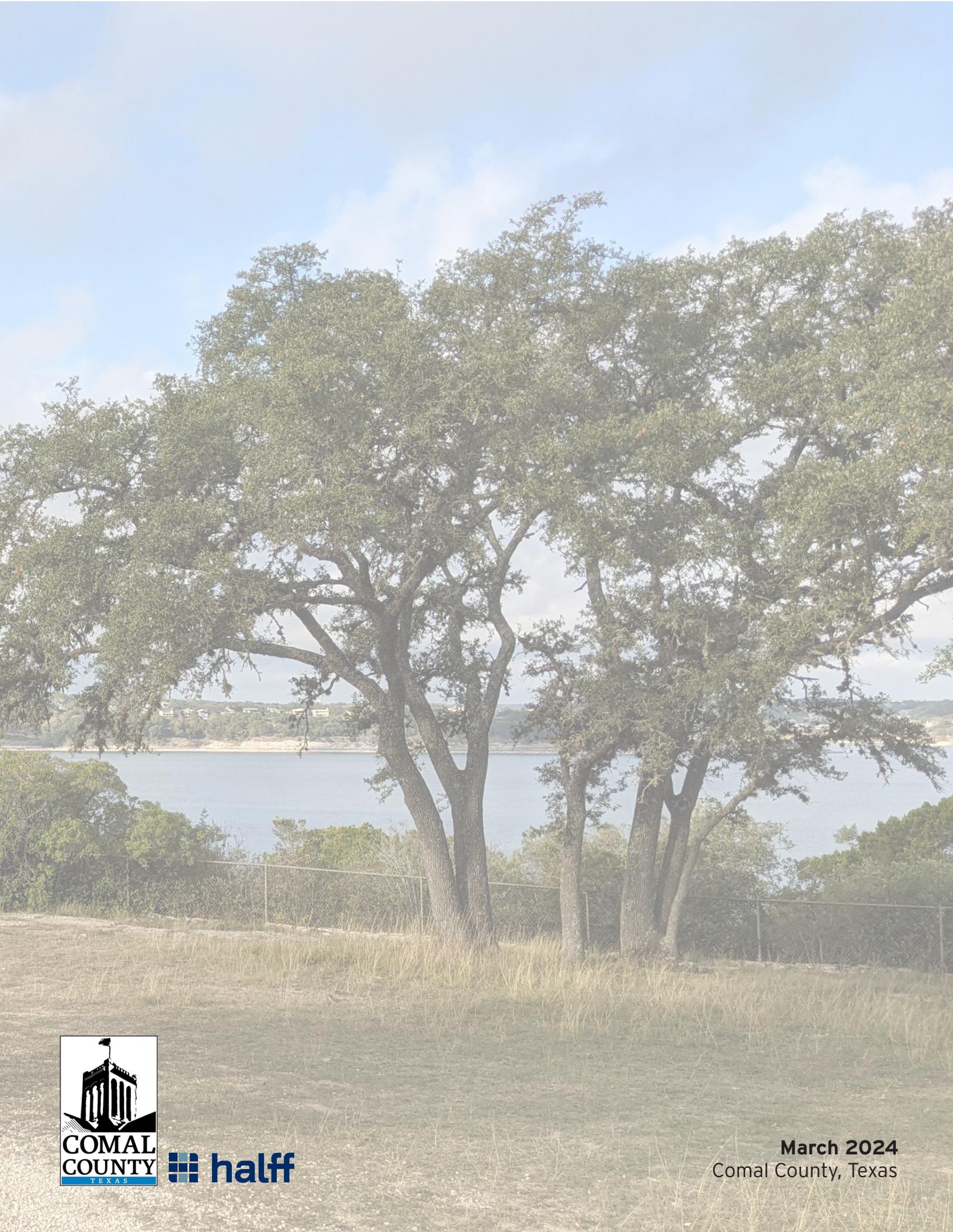


Goal Three: IMPROVE ACCESS TO PARKS & NATURAL AREAS

- 3.1 Add Park Amenities for All Users
- 3.2 Strengthen Communication with Local Governmental Entities Operating Parks

Finally, the comprehensive funding strategy outlined in the report underscores the County's commitment to realizing the goals set forth in the master plan. By identifying a variety of potential funding sources at regional, state, and federal levels, as well as through partnerships and grants, the County acknowledges the opportunities for implementation. With a clear roadmap for financial support in place, the County is poised to make strides in both active recreation and environmental conservation, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy the natural wonders of Comal County for years to come. In essence, this Master Plan not only charts a course for the future of parks and open spaces but also embodies a collective vision for the preservation of the County's cherished landscapes.





March 2024
Comal County, Texas