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CONSERVATION

Summit addresses Hill Country issues



Milan J. Michalec, president of the Hill Country Alliance, welcomes the crowd at Thursday's summit. Michalec's parents are Fredericksburg residents.

Smart development, water are key issues for group

By Ken Esten Cooke and Robert Deming

Everything from urban development to dance hall preservation was on the agenda at the Hill Country Alliance 2014 Leadership Summit, held Thursday at the Nimitz Hotel Ballroom.

"HCA was created 10 years ago to raise questions, to say things that aren't being said, and to create a common threat between us," said HCA Executive Director Christy Muse. "The HCA isn't here to save the Hill Country. That is a work in progress which depends on educating and providing information for citizens."

Keynote speaker Chuck Marohn, president of Strong Towns, made a case for changes in the way cities grow and develop. Marohn, an engineer and city planner, said financial burdens await cities who pour large sums of money into projects they hope will lure business and jobs.

"We built cities for thousands of years around foot traffic," he said. "And that made for dense, livable communities. But now we build around the automobile. And this is one of the greatest experiments ever done. We're starting to realize some things that we assumed (shared prosperity from development) would

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happen, and that's not the case. There are huge financial implications to the way we develop."

Marohn likened the post-World War II expansion to a "growth Ponzi scheme."

"We're living on borrowed money," he said. "Both large public debts, but also huge private debts. And we will be forced to absorb the costs of our current development pattern."

Marohn suggested slow, reasonable development and shedding a "build it and they will come" mind set. He found conflict between an engineer's approach to building roads where they rank speed of traffic, followed by volume, safety and, lastly, cost. (See column on page D2 for more.)

Water issues

Ken Kramer, water resource and policy expert for the Sierra Club, said there is a disconnect between reality and the state's legislative water approach.

Separate rules for groundwater and surface water lead to a confusion and will leave water needs unfulfilled.

He also criticized current candidates for not making water a central issue.

"No one running has been an active leader on water," he said. "They haven't been involved in water issues."

He also said the unwillingness to recognize climate change, especially from political leaders, is detrimental to future Texans.

"But I am a hopeless optimist," Kramer said, listing state representatives Doug Miller and Lyle Larson as emerging leaders.

Miller spoke next and said most Texans are clueless



'Strong Towns' Executive Director Chuck Marohn, right, discusses development challenges during an impromptu, after lunch gathering. Marohn stressed smart, slow development based on traditional "foot traffic" models. — Standard-Radio Post/Ken Esten Cooke



Ken Kramer, executive director for the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, addresses the audience.

about the origins of their water.

He said water planning is rife with unintended consequences. While he said he is a property rights advocate, he added that a landowner "should not be allowed to mine the aquifer under his

ON THE WEB

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land to the detriment of his neighbors."

"There is no silver bullet, and there are no easy solutions," Miller said.

Other speakers

A panel of "can do" speakers included: Chuck Patrick, who discussed rescuing the Odeon Theater in downtown Mason; John Watson, whose Fredericksburg Shines group has quickly gained a foothold in town; Brad Fink, rainwater harvesting at Bandera High School; Emily Neiman, who redesigned Junction ISD landscaping to use native plants; and Patrick Sparks, who works to preserve Texas dance halls.

Other speakers included:

Steve Nelle, land management specialist, who stressed land stewardship; Andrew Murr, Kimble County Judge and nominee for state Rep. District 53; and Blair Fitzsimons, CEO of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust, who spoke of the importance of maintaining rural Texas farms and ranches against development.

Fitzsimons noted that for each 1,000 new Texas residents, the state loses 280 acres of rural land to development, more than 1 million over the past decade.

A reception for the more than 100 in attendance was held on the grounds of the National Museum of the Pacific War.