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People conform to political boundaries. Water does not.

The Next Wave – Protecting Hill Country Water Quality

Surface water, the water we see in streams and creeks and rivers, moves from property to property, county to county, and region to region. Groundwater, the water below the surface which we cannot see, does the same in far more numerous and less obvious ways.

Ten years ago, recognizing the rapidly growing threat to the water quality of the Barton Springs segment of the Edwards Aquifer, 13 unconnected Texas Hill Country jurisdictions sat down together and talked. Acknowledging that water, especially groundwater, does not conform to human boundaries, they devised a bold plan to conform to water, by crossing those boundaries.

With help from the Hill Country Alliance, 65 participants from those jurisdictions re-convened on April 26 in Buda for *The Next Wave*, a workshop to share how they are each implementing the plan now.

“This is pretty unique,” said HCA Executive Director Christy Muse, “to have multiple cities, counties and groundwater districts working together, sharing ideas and learning from each other.”

Cooperation was part of the plan’s challenge. Texas breeds a strong proclivity to independence and self-reliance. With respect for that independence, in 2003 the governments of Travis, Hays and Blanco counties, along with seven municipalities and three water conservation districts, united in a 30-month study to devise a comprehensive plan for water quality protection. They would then implement the plan independently – but cooperatively.

Some of the consensus strategies in the plan include limits on impervious cover, buffers along waterways and preferred methods for controlling run-off during construction phases of a development project. The plan also features a modern approach for encouraging development away from sensitive areas through “Transfer of Development Rights (TDR’s). All of the details in the original plan are available at www.waterqualityplan.org.

Jurisdictions attending *The Next Wave* included the cities of Austin, Buda, Dripping Springs, Kyle, Sunset Valley, the counties of Blanco, Hays and Travis and the groundwater conservation districts of Hays Trinity, Blanco-Pedernales and Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer. Why so many far flung entities?

The Barton Springs watershed recharge zone and the contributing zone spread across a great area west of Austin, much of it over the Trinity Aquifer.

“The planning region covers a big chunk of northern Hays County, portions of western Travis County and parts of eastern Blanco County,” said moderator Grant Jackson of Naismith Engineering, who served as the primary consultant of the original regional water quality protection plan.

In 2005 this intergovernmental working group presented an ambitious design: “The Regional Water Quality Protection Plan for the Barton Spring Segment of the Edwards Aquifer.” Then as the plan was devised, each jurisdiction was on its own to use it, or not, as they saw fit.

And that could have been that.

“Having sat on this kind of project many times before, I was very cynical,” said Ira Yates, an original participant and landowner stakeholder. Yates recalls thinking, “This is going to sit on the shelf and collect dust.”

Especially daunting was the shifting nature of the political entities involved; county, city and conservation district officers and staffers change, often with each election. New members may be indifferent, at best, to projects their predecessors developed with outside entities. Yet the plan’s success required consistency and cooperation.

“We’ve had a small working group of the various jurisdictions ever since (meeting bi-monthly), to keep the effort going,” said Craig Smith, a member of the board of directors for the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation district and an original participant in the regional planning.

The April 26 meeting, held at Buda’s Onion Creek Senior Citizens Center, was an eight year review and update of how the plan’s members are faring.

“Our water is so valuable to continuing to grow our economy, we all know that,” Muse said in opening the session. “I feel so blessed to be raising my kids where we swim in the creek and spend a lot of time in the water. That’s why we are here today; the work you are doing is making a difference for every generation to come.”

Despite the long time that had passed since the plan was created and the many changes in personnel, almost all jurisdictions participated, most by sending representatives to tell how much they had achieved.

“My amazement today is that these folks have nurtured this thing along all this time, and that the document still resonates,” said Yates after the four-hour meeting. “I am in awe to see all of these people in one room at one time, continuing their education. That continuity is what’s so important.”

Each jurisdiction’s report was different, some long and detailed, others short and more general, but most were delivered with obvious pride. “Austin has put its money where its mouth is,” said Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell in introducing his city’s detailed and multi-layered presentation. “I’m proud of what the city has done.”

“That part worked out just as I hoped,” Smith said. “They all wanted to say what they had accomplished. They hadn’t all done the same thing, and maybe somebody said this or that didn’t work so well; it doesn’t matter. They are all moving in the same direction and encouraging each other to keep moving.”

Following presentations, a lunch let participants get reacquainted or, more often, meet for the first time.

“There was a lot of community building,” said HCA’s Muse. “Many of the people who participated in the original Regional Quality Plan have moved on; there are a lot of new people at the table. During the break I heard the mayor from one community meeting employees from another community,” she said.

Terry Tull, the group’s former executive director, was confident the meeting would prove a great benefit. “We will see a significant increase in participation in the work they do,” he said. “At the elected level they will be encouraging their staff more. At the staff level they will be more switched on and aware of the advantages, and we’ll see this work continue and be stronger.”

The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country.

- Louis B. Parks

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