



Envision Central Texas
Quality Growth Toolbox Case Study:

ONION CREEK GREENWAY

Travis County, Texas
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ONION CREEK GREENWAY

Onion Creek flows from its headwaters in Hays County to its confluence with the Colorado River east of Austin. The public-accessible greenway that is being assembled is the downstream section that extends from Slaughter Creek to the river. It crosses a landscape of high bluffs, broad floodplains, and bottomland thickets and runs through land historically used for agriculture but now fragmented into a patchwork of residential, commercial, and industrial uses alongside farms and pastures. It lies in southeastern Travis County which has a young, lower income, majority Hispanic population.

When completed, the greenway will be 21 miles long with a spine hike and bike trail running through parks that have both well-developed facilities and little-developed natural areas. It will connect neighborhoods, schools, and commercial nodes including Michalk Grocery at historic Moore's Crossing and a new El Mercado farmers market at the county's old Road and Bridge Yard on US Highway 183. A strong sense of place will be fostered by preserving and interpreting natural and cultural resources along the creek such as historic bridges and farmsteads, geologic features associated with the nearby extinct Pilot Knob volcano, and the fossilized skeleton of the Paleolithic Mosasaur found in the 1930s.

Areas cleared for agriculture and disturbed by road construction and aggregate mining will also be restored to more natural states. Bottomland woods and grasslands will be reestablished and excavated "borrow pits" for State Highway 130 construction will be incorporated into parks and used for fishing. The broad expanse that State Highway 130 crosses will become a green gateway to Austin. Travis County Parks selected the Onion Creek for their first greenway project for several reasons.

- It is the creek most impacted by development in eastern Travis County.
- There are already City of Austin, Travis County and State of Texas parks on this section of the creek that can be linked with strategic acquisitions.
- The creek floods severely and restoration of bottomlands woods and grasslands will help mitigate flood damage. The United States Corps of Engineers (USCOEs) is also implementing a flood mitigation project on the creek in which residential properties that have flooded repeatedly are purchased and converted into parks that can be integrated into the larger greenway system.
- Owners of large tracts of land were willing sellers.

Meeting the Needs of a Growing Population

Travis County's decision to develop greenways is based on its appreciation of how greenways can help the county meet the *multiple* needs of a population that is forecasted to grow to 1.6 million by 2035. They serve other purposes besides providing opportunities to recreate outdoors.

- Greenways play a crucial role in water resource protection: bottomlands restored to their "proper functioning condition" capture runoff, recharge groundwater and filter surface water before it reaches a creek.
- They provide wildlife habitat and connect fragmented habitat.

- They positively impact real estate values: studies show that residences that back up to natural areas have higher appraised value than homes that don't. As linear parks, greenways have the added benefit of having longer edges than more regularly shaped parks of the same acreage.
- They accommodate long bicycle and pedestrian trails that connect residential, educational, commercial, and civic centers, and help meet the transportation objective to reduce the amount of vehicle miles traveled.

A Community of Planners

Travis County first articulated its commitment to building a system of greenways and riparian corridors along its rivers and creeks in spring 2005. Soon after, the Onion Creek Greenway was included in the proposed 2005 bond election and identified as the top priority for the southeastern part of the county in its *Travis County Parks and Natural Areas Master Plan*. Following a successful bond election, Travis County burnished its vision for the corridor in its *Concept Plan for the Onion Creek Greenway*.

Travis County's planning didn't occur in a void, though, and is actually part of an ongoing dialogue among a community of planners. The Austin-Bastrop River Corridor Partnership (ABRCP), formed in spring 2003, kicked off a conversation about the Colorado River, and by association, the eastern creeks of Travis County. In 2006, they released *Discovering the Colorado: A Vision for the Austin-Bastrop River Corridor*, promoting greater appreciation of the Colorado River as a scenic, ecological, recreational, and economic resource.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is another major player. They started the "greenprint" process in fall 2005 to identify in a systematic way community values relative to conservation priorities for the county. *The Travis County Green Print for Growth* was released in fall 2006 and the Colorado River and eastern creeks' floodplains emerged as the largest concentration of highest priority lands to be conserved.

Most recently, the City of Austin has incorporated these floodplains into their comprehensive planning scenarios as natural resources requiring protection. City and county staff have also been coordinating efforts to develop other greenways in eastern Travis County.

Project Funding

In the 2005 county bond election, voters approved \$62 million in park bonds of which \$8.6 million was earmarked for the Onion Creek Greenway project to "protect and restore bottomland forest" in the creek corridor. Some of the ways to help ensure a similar bond passage include:

- Develop a park bond package that has projects that appeal to a broad constituency. Present the package to voters as one park bond proposition instead of individual park propositions.
- Implement a transparent project selection process. Explain the criteria used to rank projects so voters understand how projects are prioritized for inclusion in the bond program.
- Know your audience's interests. Findings from the *Language of Conservation* (a scientific study commissioned by The Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Land) provided insight into how to make the best case for the 2005 bond program. It recommends, for example, talking "...about water FIRST and foremost", saying "hiking, biking and walking trails" instead of just "trails", and "...connect land conservation to 'future generations'."

- Coordinate bond priorities with the system-wide parks master plan. The county was awarded a \$1 million dollar Outdoor Recreation Grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) for the first phase of Onion Creek Greenway improvements. This was contingent in large part upon the project being identified in the TPWD-approved parks master plan as the top priority for the southeast Travis County planning area.
- Have a proven track record of implementing park projects for which voters have given prior approval.

Acquiring Land...

Travis County developed a strategy for ensuring the bond covenants were fulfilled and funds spent most effectively.

- **Acquire 100-year floodplain.** With water resource protection a top priority, the 100-year floodplain was targeted for acquisition. Restoring disturbed areas to their “proper functioning condition” was part of the charge approved by voters so acquisition priorities were not driven exclusively by the quality of bottomland woods and grasslands. Targeting floodplains also makes economic sense. Federal floodplain regulations made this land largely “undevelopable” for residential and commercial use, so it appraises at a lower value for fee simple purchase.
- **Get ahead of the urban rent gradient.** Land acquisition needs to occur 5 to 10 years ahead of urbanization when the price of raw land is affordable and before land speculators buy and entitle land for urban subdivisions. Once property is sold to a speculator and entitled with development permits or sold to subdivision developer, it is much more difficult and expensive for local governments to purchase.
- **Develop “minimal viable segments.”** Parcels were also prioritized according to whether they would be part of a “minimum viable segment,” that is, a segment with logical termini that could be completed with 2005 bonds (properties near existing county parks served this purpose well). At the end of the five-year bond program, stand-alone segments with trails would be available for people to use even if no further funding was approved (and a constituency for the greenway builds through use).
- **Target large tracts owned by long-time stewards of the land.** Focus on acquiring land from original owners of large tracts with long-standing stewardship of their property because they may be willing sellers who want their property cared for and value public parkland for its legacy value.

In this case, a positive relationship with a longtime landowner in the Del Valle area helped with acquisitions from other legacy land owners. He broached the subject, introduced the county to landowners, and helped establish a friendly context for negotiations.

- **Establish relationships with other government stakeholders.** Close and continuous coordination with stakeholder government agencies and departments were important, particularly when missions were in potential conflict (Austin-Bergstrom Intercontinental Airport, Lower Colorado River Authority, and Texas Department of Texas).

- **Acquire land through free market transactions.** Property rights are important in agricultural community and if challenged, landowners can quickly align themselves against a project. For this reason, Travis County is following a no “taking” of property policy through its power of eminent domain for the Onion Creek Greenway.

Lessons Learned

The county’s experience planning and implementing the early stages of this project provides insight into both what works well and what can be improved when developing the next county greenway.

- **Tie funding requests to specific projects that are vetted by the public in park master planning and bond planning processes.** If a specific project is already approved by the public before it’s funded, land acquisition can start as soon as funds are available.
- **Talk to the public.** Travis County Commissioners appointed a citizens’ bond advisory committee to facilitate, with staff support, the public engagement process. The committee screened staff recommendations and then hosted two rounds of meetings in the county. The preliminary project list was presented and discussed in the first round; the recommended project list was presented and discussed in the second. The public could also comment on the bond package when it was presented to Commissioners Court for their consideration. The fact that the Onion Creek Greenway project was added back into the 2005 park bond package – after not making the advisory committee’s final cut – at the urging of advocates for the project demonstrates the robustness of this process.
- **Prioritize greenway objectives.** Because greenways serve multiple purposes and because funds are finite, priorities relative to competing functions need to be set. For example, acquiring land to connect parcels along the length of the creek serves trail purposes best but acquiring floodplains that are wider than long serves water resource protection best.
- **Include costs in land acquisition funding requests for building park facilities as well so the public can access the land soon after it’s purchased.**
- **Base your requests for additional operation and maintenance resources on an Activity Based Management (ABM) system.** (ABM is a discipline focusing on the management of activities within business processes as the route to continuously improve both the value received by customers and the profit earned in providing that value. ABM uses activity based cost information and performance measurements to influence management action.)
- **Assemble a team with executive intent.** Travis County assembled a team of diverse, tenured, professional staff that had planning, real estate acquisition, engineering, and parks management expertise that was spear headed by the executive manager, who championed the process and trimmed the sails.

Watershed Protection Benefits Water and Wildlife Too

Greenbelts and natural spaces benefit water quality and wildlife as they provide recreation and health benefits for people. As urbanization converts the natural landscape into residential and commercial communities, the rivers, streams, springs and natural spaces are often lost – along with ecological

function. These native habitats are nature's way of dealing with pollution while they provide food and shelter for plants and wildlife species. When these functions are lost, the water quality and wildlife suffer, often causing these natural resources to become "listed" by government agencies as impaired water bodies that need to be restored.

Onion Creek and many other streams have suffered from these urbanization impacts as our population has expanded and developed the region. Costly, government-mandated, restoration programs have been proposed or, in some cases, implemented to correct these impacts and return the streams and associated creek-side (riparian) habitat to "ecologically sound environments".

Good planning and projects like the Onion Creek Greenbelt can help avoid the harmful impacts of urbanization. If adopted as an integral part of urban planning, these projects can both protect the watershed and provide recreational and health benefits to the community – as they increase property values by contributing to the quality of life of a neighborhood.

Bacteria, silt, other contamination from non-point source pollution (runoff) are often the primary causes of impaired lakes, rivers and streams in Texas. These pollutants often cause low dissolved oxygen and other ecological responses that are harmful to fish, wildlife, and humans who are involved in contact recreation in these water bodies. Good land stewardship and stream-side buffers are often the most effective ways of protecting the watershed (drainage basin) of a region. Watershed protection programs are the preferred way of dealing with these issues in Texas.

Children and Nature Deficit

Today's children suffer from over exposure to being indoors, poor diets and lack of physical fitness. A distorted perception of how to live one's life and a lack of social interaction with other children in unstructured activities has led to unhealthy bodies, depression, difficulty learning and behaving, and loneliness.

Sixteen percent of American children are obese, a condition which may lead to increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, asthma and other physical disorders. Today's lifestyle with lack of parental time, financial resources and recreational sites result in children expending a disproportionate amount of time indoors using video games, TV, the Internet and other electronic gadgets. The media (TV, internet, movies) contribute to children staying indoors because of fears for safety. Every day a story in the news gives high impact focus on terrible things being done to children in our country ignoring the millions of children who haven't been kidnapped, assaulted or abused. Children also have a constant classroom for learning criminal acts, drug and alcohol abuse and an often slanted view of sexual behavior through the media. All of these factors contribute to the numbers of children in the schools with attention deficit disorders, depression, poor social skills and loneliness.

All of these are symptoms of a recent talked about phenomenon called "nature deficit" or a lack of independent, unstructured contact with nature. Many teachers and parents are finding and recent research is showing that combining quality experience in the world of nature provides a type of education that can result in more independent, self-confident, and socially appropriate behaviors in these youth. Nature is an incredible classroom which results in mentally, physically and socially healthier children and their lifestyle becomes balanced with indoor, electronic time.

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