**The Great Springs Project Trail—Alamo to Austin via Comal County**

“With an approximate length of 100 miles running continuously from Austin

to San Antonio, the Great Springs Project (GSP) is one of the most ambitious trail concepts in Texas. When complete, the trail will connect four natural springs running approximately parallel with I-35-Barton Springs in Austin, San Marcos Springs in Hays County, Comal Springs in New Braunfels and the Blue Hole in San Antonio. Great Springs Project CEO Garry Merritt said the main idea centers on protecting the area’s natural waters while improving the quality of life for the region’s residents. When cities do surveys, parks and open spaces and trails are always one of the top things people ask for in Central Texas.

Planning and organizing for the project has been ongoing for the last several years, but local efforts have accelerated in the first few months of this year. Leaders of the GSP have been working with city and county governments in Hays and Comal counties, where the majority of the trail will exist, to help solidify funding toward the definition and construction of smaller trails that will ultimately come together to form the GSP”. Inspiration for the GSP came from several trails throughout the country—such as the Great Allegheny Passage (150 miles), Appalachian trail (2,190 miles), Pacific Crest Trail (2,653 Miles) and others.

The process for creating trails that will accommodate the GSP is not as far along in Comal County as in Hays County. A $250,000 grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has been applied for to pay for a segment of what will likely become the Alligator Creek Trail. The 46 acres of land being donated by the development company D.R. Horton and which is earmarked for that segment represent the first physical ideations of a trail that could become part of the GSP. Another possible connector could be what is called the Dry Comal Creek corridor. Proponents in Comal County are excited for the GSP because of the increase in public green spaces it has the potential to bring. The biggest challenge to the overall effort in Comal County remains finding funding “(1). Funding for trails was introduced to the New Braunfels City Bond Advisory Committee for inclusion in the May 2023 bond election.

The GSP project began in 2011 as a collaboration of the Save Our Springs Alliance (SOS, Austin),

San Marcos River Foundation (SMRF, San Marcos), and Headwaters at Incarnate Word (HIW,

San Antonio). Crystallization of this project began in 2014 due to the inspiration of Deborah Morin. Work began on the project and included detailed mapping of the corridor, including potential trail routes, detailed research on land ownership, conservation strategies, current activities in the Austin to San Antonio region and resources needed to execute the vision. The initial focus centered on developing “proof of concept” with some initial land deals, namely in San Marcos in support of its “Loop & Check” vision for a greenways trail system from San Marcos Springs, around the city and up the Blanco River Valley. The success in San Marcos

gave GSP the on-the-ground experience and demonstrated that they were able to bring public and private funds together, both donated and invested, to protect critical Edwards Aquifer lands and connect them in ways that serve other important conservation, recreation and economic development goals.

Meanwhile, other local and regional conservation groups were recognizing the need to coordinate efforts among disparate groups working within their 18-county scope. The

Hill Country Alliance (HCA) based in Austin, along with some of their partner organizations, including the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association, Hill Country Conservancy, SOS and SMRF, began investigating regional conservation “networks” with an eye to creating one for the Hill Country. With the help of Ross Strategic, this large-scale effort culminated in the formation of the new Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (THCCN), of which the GSP partners are a part. GSP is working to embed the GSP vision for the four urbanizing counties into the larger THCCN scope for all 18 counties of the Hill Country, and thus are working closely with HCA and other network partners. Comal County now has a countywide conservation organization. Comal County Conservation Alliance (CCCA) was organized due to the efforts of the League of Women Voters of New Braunfels, HCA, and the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA) based in San Antonio.(2)

Friends for the Preservation of Historic Landa Park invites the public to a presentation on

Monday 4/11/2022 at 2:30 PM in the Landa Haus—360 Aquatic Circle, New Braunfels.

Title: ***Plans for the Great Springs Project in Comal County***.

Great Springs Project speakers include: Courtney Lyons-Garcia—Parks & Trails Specialist and David Bemporad—Trails and Transportation Planner.

Courtney served as Executive Director of the Big Bend Conservancy for 13 years and currently

serves as the Executive Director for Public Land Foundation in addition to her work at GSP.

David brings years of research, lobbying, planning, and small organization administration working to plan, design, and implement publicly accessible cycling and pedestrian trails throughout Central Texas.

Sources:

(1). Brian Rash, *Community Impact, New Braunfels Edition*, Volume 4, Issue 6, May -1 June 3,2021. ***Efforts increase to advance massive Great Springs Project.***

(2). Helen Ballew, ***Corridor Conservation and Genesis of the Great Springs Project,1980’s to*** ***the Present***. Personal communication.