

Texas Parks and Wildlife votes preservation over development for Honey Creek Ranch

The future of a Comal County freshwater creek is looking fresher today.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission voted Thursday to acquire and prevent development at Honey Creek, one of the most iconic streams in the Texas Hill Country.

The commission, which has worked closely with other environmental groups on this deal, seeks to preserve a roughly 515-acre tract just south of Honey Creek State Natural Area and the Guadalupe State Park in Comal County. The owners of the land — known now as Honey Creek Ranch — initially intended to sell it for the development of a more than 1,600-home subdivision, which was opposed by residents and environmentalists.

Now, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is on track to build a protected park, which could keep the headwaters of Honey Creek preserved as they have been for centuries.

“This south end park access will result in the opportunity for some significant recreational development that we just simply haven’t had in that portion in that state natural area complex,” said Ted Hollingsworth, a land conservation branch manager for Texas Parks and Wildlife. “The tract is also going to be critical for the long-term protection of the water quality and quantity in Honey Creek.”

The acquisition was made possible, in part, by the Nature Conservancy, a global environmental and conservation organization that negotiated a deal for the TPWD to acquire the land for preservation with no subdivision. The organization, along with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, is working closely with other partners to

gather donations for the acquisition, as the owners are now willing to sell the property at a bargain price.

Honey Creek is among the last remaining pristine waterways in the Texas Hill Country. It begins 25 miles north of downtown San Antonio and runs northeast through more than 2,000 acres of Honey Creek State Natural Area and into the Guadalupe River. The water normally gets its flow from Honey Creek Cave — a waterway that runs over 20 miles underground — and some smaller springs at the creek's headwaters near Honey Creek Ranch.

“Thanks to the brush management and graving stewardship practices its owner has employed, the land is in excellent condition,” said Suzanne Scott, state director of The Nature Conservancy in Texas. “Unlike many Hill Country grasslands that have been lost to development or degraded due to overgrazing, the property contains healthy diverse grasses that slow runoff and absorb rainwater that flows into a portion of the Honey Creek.”

Land owners Ronnie and Terry Urbanzyk have lived on the ranch since the early 1990s, and beginning in 2018, they began negotiating to develop a \$60 million subdivision on their property. Since their intentions to develop were made public, the matter has been a point of contention in the community.

Initially, the plan for the subdivision meant an average of 500,000 gallons of treated wastewater would be discharged into Honey Creek. After public outcry, Urbanzyk withdrew his application with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality in late 2019 and reapplied to dump the wastewater in an underground drip system. But the drip system was also met with opposition as the wastewater could flow either into Honey Creek or the Lower Glen Rose Aquifer, according to comments submitted to the TCEQ by George Veni, the executive director of the National Cave and Karst Research Institute. The Glen Rose Aquifer is a segment of the more major Trinity Aquifer, which is connected to the Edwards Aquifer.

The subdivision was also initially planned to have approximately 2,396 homes, about eight houses per acre. But after 15 hours of negotiations between opponents of the subdivision and developers, the number of houses was reduced to 1,640 homes — equating to 3 houses per acre.

“I’m really hoping that the Nature Conservancy can successfully secure the funds needed and that the Urbanzyk’s are willing to go forward with it,” said Annalisa Peace, executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance. “This acquisition is the best possible outcome for Honey Creek Ranch.”

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