

Land Conservation Can Strengthen El Paso

The Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative is championing a community effort to develop a mapping tool that will identify & classify lands that best accommodate development and gray infrastructure while also considering lands to conserve. The Land Conservation Inventory Tool is a collaborative approach specifically designed to obtain community input, create goals, assist in designing policies, identify land protection focus areas and develop funding mechanisms to create a lasting legacy in our region. This tool will strengthen and provide scientific data to assist in managing the Plan El Paso, Northwest Master Plan, the El Paso Sustainability Plan, the El Paso Open Space Plan, Dona Ana County Comprehensive Plan and other regional efforts that identify preserving large, connected natural areas.

The purpose of the project is to provide scientific data to assist in providing better information to organizations, government agencies, individuals, developers and business owners about the existing resources which will assist in their decision making. The Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative's goals are: (1) safeguard natural and cultural features, (2) improve wildlife habitat and connectivity, (3) address the health of our regional watershed and (4) contribute to the local economy of our communities.

Outcomes

- **A streamlined permitting process.** Identifying lands suitable for development will reduce conflicts with conservation advocates, and allow for faster project completion.
- **Reduced infrastructure costs for flood control.** Protecting arroyos and other water conveyance features in their natural condition has proven economic benefits.
- **Increased ecotourism that boosts the local economy.** A defined network of natural areas will energize the community and strengthen local tourist related businesses.
- **A healthier community and workforce.** Safe and easy access to parks, trails, and open space are desirable amenities for a thriving economy.

Additional Strengths of the Land Conservation Inventory Tool

1. **Assist in Decision Making:** Speed up the permitting process for developers because the jurisdictional agencies will be in agreement on the areas suitable for development.
2. **Accountable to Citizens:** It will determine where transportation corridors will best improve the quality of life for residents and visitors to our region.
3. **Economic Growth:** It will identify recreation and ecotourism opportunities that have the potential to increase local business revenue.
4. **Holistic Approach:** It will improve the safety of citizens and reduce flood damage when arroyos are left as natural features that can handle the high quantities and fast speeds of water flowing to the Rio Grande, while considering the surrounding use of lands and gray infrastructure.
5. **Healthy Lifestyle:** It will promote physical and mental health by expanding recreational and outdoors experiences, potentially reducing healthcare expenses

The Land Conservation Inventory Tool is supported by the partnership and collaboration of federal, state and local agencies, local businesses including developers, realtors and non-profits in New Mexico and Texas. The Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative will work across political boundaries with people and organizations that have diverse interests yet share a common place and purpose. The Cooperative will provide an interactive GIS-based map of lands ranked by their importance for further development and conservation.

Building on Local Success

Over the years we have seen the southwest region work to offer a better quality of life through collaboration and partnerships with developers, citizens and environmentalists as referenced below. These entities and organizations have laid the foundation for growth and preservation.

Still, the region is facing some tough issues. For instance, there are just 1.38 acres of park space for every 1,000 persons in El Paso and in a city like Minneapolis they have 13.3 acres per 1,000 residents. We continue to experience flood damage that results from the filling or alteration of arroyos. There is a loss of wildlife every time we level terrain for building. Responding to these and other challenges requires concerted action and collaboration from all stakeholders. Unless we work together as one region across political boundaries, we may be overwhelmed by the dramatic shifts in demographics and changes in our environment. We may find ourselves unable to achieve the quality of life and public health that we wish for ourselves and future generations. Therefore we must create a framework which will give us and our organizations greater freedom to protect and improve the green spaces which are critical to our needs. This framework must be based on firm science.

Supporting Documentation

This Land Conservation Inventory Tool will not revamp, replicate or replace existing plans, but will help provide data to assist in making sound decisions. When such a tool is used in conjunction with other planning processes it may guide the pattern of development. It does not dictate whether development will occur.

“As the region’s population dynamics are shifting, leaders must plan for the future; taking into consideration the evolving needs from the continuing rural to urban migration, changing demographics, and intensified pressure on our land, water, and wildlife resources”. *Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan, 2012, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department*

Economic & Tourism Impact

We can create opportunities for our local economies to grow by investing in land for outdoor recreation and by investing in our working ranches and farms. Such investments have a ripple effect. For example, investment in a nature based park can create more jobs and lead to more visitor spending. With their growing international reputation as tourist destinations for nature and adventure, our mountains can bring more outside dollars to the area.

In 2006, Hueco Tanks brought in \$582,207 in county sales, \$331,774 in county residents’ personal income. In 2007, Hueco Tanks and Franklin Mountains State Park brought 72,644 visitors to El Paso County.

Texas State Park, Natural Economic Assets

A key finding in a review of more than 200 research studies by the American Heart Association in 2011 was that for every dollar spent on building biking trails and walking paths an estimated \$3 in medical expenses is saved.

Trust for America’s Health, 2012

In the United States, urban park trees remove over 75,000 tons of air pollution annually, with a value of \$500 million.

Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan, 2012

The economic impact on sales for Goose Island State Park in Aransas County was estimated to be over \$7 million with almost 200 jobs created in 2006. The total economic impact reported for local (city and county) parks in the same year was a massive \$5.51 billion in spending and 38,390 jobs created statewide. (.)

Crompton & Culpepper, 2006 and The Perryman Group, 2006

Impact on Health

Natural open space improves mental and physical health. Researchers hypothesize that exposure to the natural outdoors causes significant, measurable changes to the brain. These changes lead to clearer thinking, greater ability to focus and maximum cognitive ability. In short: enjoying nature makes you smarter. Recent studies have already linked spending time in nature with stress reduction and overall happiness.

Backpacker Magazine

Performance on memory and attention tests improved by 20% after study subjects paused for a walk through an arboretum. When these people were sent on a break to stroll down a busy street in town, no cognitive boost was detected.

Marc Berman, Psychological Science, 2008

Nature deficit disorder “research indicates that one of the best antidotes to a stressful lifestyle is to spend time in natural settings outdoors. Children who spend time outdoors are likely to be: happier, healthier, smarter, more cooperative, better problem solvers, and more creative. Children need leisurely, unscripted, and exploratory hours to find the wonders in their own backyards and neighborhoods, from discovering the beauty of the stars in the night sky to watching lizards on a warm summer’s day.”

Cheryl Charles, Nature Deficit Disorder Special Edition, March 18, 2013

Impact on Education

Outdoor education provides students with an opportunity to connect with nature, learn hands-on science, achieve personal growth, and develop a commitment to environmental stewardship and community service. We believe outdoor education provides a better future for our students, communities and our world.

Outdoor Education Foundation

Natural views from high school positively impact students’ academic achievement and behavior.

Matsuoka, R. H. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2008

School gardens positively impact children’s learning and behavior.

Blair, D. Journal of Environmental Education, 2009

The Land Conservation Inventory Tool

The Land Conservation Inventory Tool will provide information to communities and decision makers about their region. Such information will encourage communities to plan for economic growth, increasing recreation and natural systems, before large scale development occurs, in order to maximize the benefits that these systems provide. This tool will highlight critical areas for conservation, provide information to help coordinate zoning and regulatory policies and connect local natural resources to surrounding communities via corridors. Finally, it promotes the wise use of public funds to provide public services by using natural systems in addition to or instead of man-made systems.

Strategic Conservation, by The Conservation Fund

- Protects and maintains the values & functions of natural ecosystems;
- Sustains working land;
- Reduces opposition to development;
- Provides predictability and certainty;
- Reduces costs for built infrastructure.

The Land Conservation Inventory Tool will complement and strengthen the Northwest Master Plan, the El Paso Sustainability Plan, the El Paso Open Space Plan and other regional efforts that identify preserving large, connected natural areas. The regional focus will include Dona Ana, Hudspeth and El Paso counties. The critical zone of focus will be the Organ Mountains, Franklin Mountains and surrounding areas.

The Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative include the Frontera Land Alliance, Desert Lands Conservation Cooperative, and the National Park Service Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program. Key partners have met several times & conducted conference calls over the past year to explore community interest in the project, identified potential project partners and met with the City Manager and Deputy Manager of El Paso to date.

Stakeholder Organizations

City of El Paso Open Space Advisory Board
Chihuahuan Desert Education Coalition
Desert Lands Conservation Cooperative
Doña Ana County
El Paso Community College
Elpasonaturally
Franklin Mountains Wilderness Coalition
New Mexico State University
Southwest Environmental Center
Texas A & M AgriLife Extension
Texas Master Naturalist; Tierra Grande Chapter
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
The Frontera Land Alliance
University of Texas at El Paso
Urban Wildlife Program of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
US Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management
US Department of Interior National Park Service
US Department of Agriculture
US Fish and Wildlife Conservation Lands Cooperative

Las Cruces and El Paso have laid the foundation for growth while safeguarding natural assets with the following plans:

Las Cruces: City of Las Cruces has a Community Development Department and a separate Economic Development Office.

Doña Ana County: The Community Development Department's GIS Division develops and maintains Doña Ana County's Geographic Information System. This Division maintains over one hundred layers of information (databases), develops department-specific applications, produces maps, and provides training and technical support to other County departments. Digital data is available to the public for nominal reprographic fees. Available data includes street centerlines/names, ETZ zoning, County zoning, corporate boundaries, topography and selected aerial photography and satellite imagery.. Doña Ana County along with other regional partners continue to be engaged in regional long range visioning and planning initiatives which include open space preservation, low impact recreational activities, and watershed management.

Plan El Paso:

Volume 2 page 10.10 –

Habitat and Biodiversity: The City should produce or commission a plan for biological corridors and habitat that identifies existing habitats and corridors and candidate sites and routes for restoration.

Volume 2 page 10.27 –

Habitat and Biodiversity Goals 10.8: Protect and enhance ecologically sensitive areas such as aquifer recharge zones, hillsides, bosques, arroyos, wetlands, and plants and wildlife resources.

Wildlife, page 11.15

Protect native wildlife through the preservation of the Chihuahuan Desert habitat.

Policy 5.11.4: Restore significant bosque areas along the upper and lower Rio Grande to provide natural open space, stormwater detention, and wildlife habitat.

Goal 10.8: Protect and enhance ecologically sensitive areas such as aquifer recharge zones, hillsides, bosques, arroyos, wetlands, and plant and wildlife resources.

El Paso Northwest Master Plan: Goals are to design a place that has neighborhoods and centers that are complete, compact, mixed-use, pedestrian friendly and connected by transit; to ensure safeguarding and access to nature; to provide for the slow release of land as described in Plan El Paso. The City of El Paso conserved 600 acres which have been donated to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

El Paso City Open Space Master Plan: The desert lands have vibrant communities of animals and plants. From the mountain foothills to the Rio Grande's banks, we have a variety of open spaces. We also have wetlands and lakes that are important to the survival of native resident and migratory species. A green infrastructure network connects natural areas in a system of hubs, links, and sites. The interconnection is critical in providing both connectivity for ecological functions and for passage and dispersal of wildlife. Each bionetwork has its own particular part to play in benefiting our community.

El Paso Sustainability Plan: To achieve our City Council’s vision that El Paso “becomes the most livable city in the United States” and “becomes the lowest car dependent city in the Southwest,” we have adopted the following goals: Become the least car dependent city in the U.S. by promoting integrated user-friendly transit systems. Establish green building practices as standard business practice in El Paso. Achieve international recognition for successful preservation of our Chihuahuan desert heritage for all time.

Benefits of a Land Conservation Inventory Tool

Whether we live in the city or the countryside, we rely on the natural systems that support us, affect our health and happiness and give us a sense of place, pride and identity. Having clean water and air and plenty of natural open spaces attracts businesses and will improve our living standards. A healthy natural environment is a cost effective tool to support economic growth, improve public health and enhance quality of life. Our ranchers and farmers are great stewards of their land and play a vital role in protection of water, wildlife, animal corridors, healthy soil and food production.

The regional map to be created by the Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative will be a critical tool to assist the El Paso-Las Cruces region make decision to achieve their stated goals for a higher quality of life for today and tomorrow.

Around the Nation

US Department of Interior, October 31, 2013: In remarks today [10/31/13] at the National Press Club, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell laid out a strong agenda to strengthen our economy and ensure that we pass along our nation’s rich conservation legacy to the next generation – a path forward that includes balanced development and engaging and employing youth on our public lands. (<http://www.doi.gov/news>) “This Order will help Interior create a simpler, more straightforward approach for businesses to be good partners and good stewards of our public lands,” said Jewell. “Today we have an unprecedented opportunity – using science and technology to create a better understanding of landscapes than ever before – to advance important conservation goals and achieve our development objectives. We know it doesn’t have to be an either-or.” By 2017, Interior will work to: develop or enhance partnerships in 50 cities to create opportunities for outdoor recreation for more than ten million young people; provide educational opportunities to at least ten million of the nation’s K through 12 students annually; engage one million volunteers in support of public lands, effectively tripling the numbers we have now; and provide 100,000 work and training opportunities to young people.

National Land Trust Alliance: In the magazine *Saving Land* James Levitt stated that “Large-landscape conservation initiatives are thriving in the early 21st century at a scale and scope that would have been out of the reach or imagination of most conservationists active in the post-World War II era. Given the exceptional budgetary limitations of our day and the pace of human development across the globe, *how* is it possible that such ambitious, complex and just plain big efforts come to fruition? The dramatic changes that the world is in the midst of undergoing in the early part of this new century—grassroots initiatives,

Benefits of Conservation Networks (The Conservation Fund)

- ✓ Preserve land with significant resources.
- ✓ Sustain the functions and benefits of nature through a holistic approach.
- ✓ Make sound resource decisions.
- ✓ Have accountability (a meaningful rationale for conservation).
- ✓ Inspire action of partners and stakeholders.
- ✓ Maximize fundraising for conservation.
- ✓ Create organizational capacity and effectiveness.
- ✓ Compel action with smart messaging.

technological innovation, new financial tools and limitless networking capabilities—will undoubtedly continue to shape large-scale conservation efforts and outcomes in the years to come.”

Approaches to large landscape conservation are well documented and there are expert practitioners across the U.S. The Conservation Cooperative executive committee hosted a webinar (June 2013) with experts with The Conservation Fund, University of Utah Ecological Planning Center and the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources to learn about various approaches to community-based landscape conservation. Key findings and discussion points from the webinar include:

- Biologically based data is the foundation to creating a quality life for all to enjoy
- Collaboration from all parties is critical, developers, realtors, businesses, public, etc...
- A host of the mapping data layers is key.

Deliverables

The Land Conservation Inventory Tool will address land and water concerns at an appropriate geographic scale, regardless of political and jurisdictional boundaries. Scientific data will show the rationale for the decisions.

The anticipated deliverables are:

- A regional map with numerous GIS data layers;
- Create a network for stakeholders;
- Establish a database;
- Promote, coordinate, and support efforts to grow understanding and participation;
- Work to identify necessary policy tools and incentives to achieve a landscape conservation inventory tool;

Implementing these steps will take a sustained, collaborative effort among all levels of government, philanthropic foundations, academic institutions, and the public—all needing to be willing to accept and work with multiple preservation objectives for a large-scale, regional-wide land map.

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