



Bexar County Commissioners Court

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Agreements set foundation for regional habitat conservation plan

Commissioners Court approved on Tuesday three agreements to begin developing the Southern Edwards Plateau Regional Habitat Conservation Plan. Development of the plan is funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a 25 percent shared cost between Bexar County and the City of San Antonio. The ultimate goal of the plan is to allow responsible growth and development while protecting endangered species, particularly in and around Camp Bullis.

The agreements are with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, through which the \$1.3 million grant will be monitored; the City of San Antonio to specify how the 25 percent local cost will be shared; and Loomis Partners, the consultant selected to develop the plan for the County.

Habitat conservation plans are approved and authorized by the Fish and Wildlife Service to give landowners, citizen groups and local governments the ability to protect endangered species habitats and allow concurrent development. Travis, Williamson, Hays and Comal counties all have such plans in place or are in the process of developing one. Bexar County and San Antonio are the only remaining urban center in Texas that has more than 10 endangered species and no conservation plan. The regional plan will include Bandera, Medina, Kendall and Kerr counties.

The proposed Southern Edwards plan is critical to accommodating the growing number of military missions coming to this area, and for protecting endangered species in the region.

Having a regional habitat conservation plan essentially gives developers a tool to develop in compliance with the Endangered Species Act, while giving local governments and residents the power to control development in light of the Act. It puts the required mitigation of endangered species into the hands of the local community, rather than the federal government, said Andrew Winter, environmental engineer for Bexar County.

With a plan in place, the process for receiving an 'incidental take permit' will be expedited. Such permits allow a private developer to disturb an endangered species habitat by mitigating the taking through activities outlined in the plan, which could include paying an impact fee to support habitat acquisition or conservation.

Before the end of the year, Commissioners Court will appoint a 21-member Citizens Advisory Committee to assist with developing the plan. The committee will be supported by a Biological Advisory Team and staff from the County, City, Texas Parks and Wildlife and Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan should take two years to develop.