

1. Panel: The Power of Storytelling. This panel explained how renewed inclusion of ancient stories handed down by the people indigenous to Texas has been used to connect across dividing lines, inspire beyond education, and drive change through meaningful calls to action. Panelists discussed their work within the National Park system, independent film-making with biologists to explain as simply as possible ecosystem-related subjects, and new forms of children's education through story-telling and other holistic methods.

2. Real Perspectives from the Rural Hill Country: Judge **Bella Robio** of Real County told us about the real-world problems of her jurisdiction covering 700 square miles with two rivers systems: the Frio and the Nueces. The biggest challenges are lack of broadband and poor cell phone service (even affecting police operations). Also, with four huge ranches still intact in Real County, there are ongoing, long-standing issues such as ranchers (who own both sides of the river) fencing across a public access river to control their livestock. The best solution Robio has found for these problems is simply personal and persistent networking.

One bright spot in the near future: the **SOLAR ECLIPSE** in two years will bring a great deal of tourism \$ for Real and surrounding counties!

3. KEYNOTE: Different Shades of Green, presentation by David Boggs of TPWD. Pulling no punches, Boggs reported that Texas has been a "majority-minority" state for almost 15 years now, especially in the Hill Country. The demographic numbers tell that most of the Hill Country population are now women and people of color, yet the minority governs (white men).

For this very reason, Texas Parks and Wildlife has initiated programs to attract, **INCLUDE**, speak to and educate all residents of Texas. TPWD is addressing these concerns through jobs, careers, media ads, etc.

Why is this important for those of us interested in conservation?

Everybody has an intrinsic appreciation for the outdoors, and we **ALL** face the same challenges today: urbanization, groundwater overuse, lack of protection for outdoor spaces, "Nature deficit disorder," availability of

Natural Resource Practitioners, mistrust of government, increased air pollutants, climate change, expanding conservation challenges (everyone's issue), and the relevance/value of conservation organizations to changing demographics, that can directly affect legislation and funding (the need to increase the conservation-minded voter base). The sheer number and scope of these challenges need different perspectives!

For organizations, Boggs went over inclusion strategies that begin with distinguishing between participating (merely being invited) and "BELONGING." Key factors to "belonging" include personal security (the absence of only feeling tolerated), being truly missed if absent, and leadership sharing.

Whether you like it or not, one last point: metrics and counting tell the story of what's going on, i.e. "It doesn't count if you don't count it!"

4. Water and Equity in the Hill Country. There is a new report from the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute exploring how demographics, income level, water characteristics, etc. and history interact. How does development affect displacement, as in who gets displaced? Today, the numbers show that Latinos are mostly urban, while rural populations are mostly white. If interested in more about this: go to <http://txlandtrends.org/> and <http://nri.tamu.edu/>.

5. What to Do When the Well Runs Dry - Solutions to Tackle Drought and Growth, moderated by Vanessa Puig-Williams, Environmental Defense Fund. Just a few "fun" statistics: according to the Gunnar Brune Report, 1975, the Hill Country had 273 historical springs of a minimum of 1 cfs, of which 40 were dry and 5 inundated. Fast forward to today: 62 are dry (mostly on the western edge of the Edwards Plateau where the geography flattens out), with 9 inundated.

What Can a Landowner Do?

- 1) **Engage with your local groundwater district.**
- 2) **Don't wait** (until your springs dry up)! **Document**, and keep a journal on each, including temperature (a food thermometer is good enough).

- 3) **Where does your water come from?** Know your aquifer and the boundaries of your “spring-shed.” (And be willing to reduce pumping in it if necessary.)
- 4) **Galvanize your community** around shared values and solutions, including conservation easements.
- 5) **Groundwater Districts have many tools.**
 - a. Spacing rules (between water wells).
 - b. Control of Tract sizes (requiring them to be bigger and bigger, for example) to allow a well. This also prevents a non-landowner from controlling the pumping of water from that tract.

6. LIGHTNING ROUNDS (5 minutes each)

Edwards Aquifer Protection Program (David Bezanson, The Nature Conservancy)

TPWD’s Guadalupe Bass Restoration Initiative: Reflecting on 30 Years (Melissa Parker, TPWD)

Nueces River Authority – 20 Years of Engagement to Save a River (Julie Lewey)

Friends of the Night Skies (Soll Sussman, Hays County FNS)

SELAH (the Bamberger Ranch Preserve): 53 years (and counting) of restoration and stewardship. <http://www.bambergerranch.org/> (April Samson)

PROP 5 and TEXAS PARKS: the next 100 years – how the sale of sporting goods contributes to Texas State Parks (Zach Spector TPWD).

7. A CONVERSATION WITH REGIONAL ELECTED OFFICIALS

Moderator: David Yeates (HCA Board)

Panelists: Representative **Erin Zwiener** (representing Hays County, near Austin – includes Dripping Springs – the second fastest growing county in the country!), **Don Durden** (Kendall County Commissioner), and **Hal Rose** (Kimble County Judge-Elect).

Elected officials can have an outsized impact on influencing some of our region's most vexing challenges. From the local to the statewide level, these community leaders can be visionary, creative, and inspiring in their quest to bring community representation to all aspects of life in the Hill Country. Learn more about how best to connect with and influence leaders in your community.

Erin Zwiener, State Representative: Water is a HUGE issue. Also major: 1) concrete batch-plants being located too close to people [Concrete batch plants use equipment to produce concrete and concrete products by batching or mixing cements and other materials], 2) aggregate mining in the area and 3) more and more pressure on recreational resources.

- Zwiener believes that bipartisan partnership is possible. One must start and maintain relationships. Even small but organized groups can get attention: ask for a meeting and follow up.

We do need stronger tools from the state legislature to help cities and counties deal more effectively with development issues.

Don Durden talked about a transportation initiative that proposed a loop around Boerne (to try to control inner city traffic). It was controversial and ultimately rejected by the City Commissioners. Durden then proposed using a consensus-based approval process – a consensus of multiple, different entities/ organizations. This process takes a long time (still ongoing since 2019), but it has made possible new transport policies, and has funding. However, at the same time the density of Kendall County's population continues to grow due to the selling of lots of only 1/10 acre (!) – destroying the transport system and a way of life.

What to do?

Study the groundwater rules such as about minimum spacing between wells.

**** Build local coalitions.**

Kendall County has all but passed a Conservation Land bill.

Durden also mentioned a relatively new idea: “cluster development,” a form of subdivision complete with connecting trails and “micro-corridors” to reduce traffic congestion on the roads.

[Wikipedia: A residential cluster development, or open space development, is the grouping of residential properties together on a development site to use the extra land as open space, recreation or agriculture. It is increasingly becoming popular in subdivision development because it allows the developer to spend much less on land and obtain much the same price per unit as for detached houses. The shared garden areas can be a source of conflict, however. Claimed advantages include more green/public space, closer community, and an optimal storm water management. Cluster development often encounters planning objections. Actually, a very old idea from the medieval village to the New England town.]

Hal Rose: He is still relatively new to Kimble County. Kimble County’s biggest issue: so little money, they now have less than ½ the tax base than before. And... need courthouse restoration, mental health programs, and growth and development control. DEVELOPMENT IS COMING, so the commissioners need to be ready. Kimble County needs growth but must be proactive about managing it, with new, thorough subdivision regulations.

Texas (the state government) has a bad habit of only giving unfunded mandates (NOT tools) to cities and counties.

Rose’s Tips for individuals: Go to all governmental meetings at the local level. And if you’re ever involved in a decision and there is a polarized stalemate, don’t just say no, instead have some kind of alternative solution ready, even if it is less than perfect.