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Conservancy shifts into high gear

Efforts steer land away from development

Austin Business Journal - by [Sandra Zaragoza](#) ABJ Staff

Scott Storm decided the best way to keep his family's ranch together was through a conservation agreement that would protect more than 5,000 acres covered in live oak, Spanish oak and native prairie grasses.

So he started working with the Hill Country Conservancy to do so. About a decade later, a little more than half of Storm Ranch — encompassing about 5,685 acres in the rolling Central Texas Hill Country about 25 miles southwest of Austin — is preserved.

Storm said it's been a long haul that's been worth the trouble.

"We're hoping that the family will continue to keep it together right on down the generations in this flexible arrangement," Storm said.

He credits the Hill Country Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust, for making the conservation of the land possible.

"We still have a good handful, about 1,800 acres, to get done but we are working away. We are getting it done, and, hopefully, we will have it finished in the next five to 10 years," Storm said.

Another piece of Storm Ranch will soon become preserved thanks to the conservancy and two new Department of Agriculture and National Resources Conservation Service grants totaling \$2.16 million. The grants will help conserve hundreds of acres on the Storm Ranch, which is primarily a cattle ranch, as well as Anne Brockenbrough's 286-acre cattle and horse ranch in eastern Travis County. The deals are pending.

Now in its 10th year, the Hill Country Conservancy has preserved thousands of acres by leveraging federal and city grants to protect green spaces, endangered wildlife and water from springs and aquifers. It also provides educational programs for the public, and is planning to build Walk-For-A-Day, a 34-mile trail system that starts at the Barton Creek Greenbelt and goes to Onion Creek.

What the land trust does is "keep the Hill Country unique and Austin special," said George Cofer, its executive director, "It really is about the quality of life and health of Central Texans."

Keeping Austin green

The trust works to conserve public and private lands in Travis and Hays counties through conservation easements.

Under a conversation easement, a land trust or public agency pays willing landowners to restrict development of their land. As a land trust, the Hill Country Conservancy is able to offer landowners estate planning, federal tax credits and cash in exchange for development rights.

Conservation easements are relatively new to Texas, first gaining popularity in the 1990s, Cofer said. Interest in conservation agreements has risen due to the Hill Country Conservancy's work and that of other land trusts in the region.

Cofer and his team hope to create green space during the down economy now that the real estate industry has cooled off.

"We are encouraging the city and county to put together funding to take advantage of the down market," Cofer said. "There are huge tracts of land going into foreclosure, and it seems like an opportunity for the public to benefit by purchasing some of that land."

Additionally, the conservancy has applied for \$6 million from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; it hopes to learn whether it will receive that funding this fall.

Andrea Rado, the conservancy's director of community relations, said it has made big strides toward protecting open spaces in Central Texas in the past decade.

"In 1990, Zilker Park's 300 acres was the only green space on the map," Rado said.

Since its inception, the trust — working with the National Resources Conservation Service, the city and county — has protected more than 25,000 acres in the Barton Springs Zone of the Edwards Aquifer, which feeds the iconic Barton Springs swimming hole and provides drinking water for thousands.

"Every project is unique," Cofer said. "The rights they reserve are to keep doing what they're doing — hunt, recreation ... the personal enjoyment and economic benefit of one's land. And we want them to keep doing that."



Nick Simonite

George Cofer, head of the Hill Country Conservancy, has helped preserve tens of thousands of acres — and he sees opportunity during the recession.

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These days, the conservancy has become known for taking on larger, more complex transactions. The organization typically attracts \$2 million to \$5 million in federal grant funding annually to complete deals.

In the case of working-class rancher Anne Brockenbrough, a deal with the Hill Country Conservancy will relieve some of the financial pressures of running the ranch, while preserving the land, wildlife and creek.

Brockenbrough said she was prompted to do the conservation easement because she was concerned about developers building on neighboring land.

"I'm passionate about land conservation. This grant will truly help me hold onto and preserve the land," she said. "And I want to continue to help my neighbors preserve their land. This is part of a grand plan to preserve thousands of acres."

A team effort

Congressman Lloyd Doggett said that while public entities and nonprofits can do much to preserve land, cooperation among private landowners is essential.

And businesses come into the equation, too. The Hill Country Conservancy attracts about \$100,000 in individual gifts, along with major donations from corporate sponsors, including AMD, Bury + Partners, Endeavor Real Estate Group, HEB, the Real Estate Council of Austin, Simon Properties and Stratus Properties.

Although more landowners are forming agreements with land trusts to preserve the open space and receive tax credits, the deals aren't right for everyone.

"It's not realistic that someone that is desperate to unload land can do one of these deals because they might not have the cash reserves to properly represent themselves [with an attorney]," the conservancy's Rado said.

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