

From homes to parkland? Landowners consider deal that could spare Honey Creek



by [Brendan Gibbons](#) August 18, 2021



The Honey Creek Ranch in Comal County could be acquired and preserved as parkland. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

The Nature Conservancy and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department are among the entities negotiating a land acquisition that could preserve Honey Creek, one of the few pristine streams left in the Hill Country, from development.

At their Aug. 26 meeting, commissioners will [consider a deal](#) that would conserve 515 acres upstream of Guadalupe River State Park and Honey Creek State Natural Area off State Highway 46 in Comal County. The acreage is currently part of Honey Creek Ranch, whose owners had proposed [replacing the open ranch land](#) with more than 1,600 homes and three schools.

The development drew opposition from neighboring landowners and environmental groups because it would lie upstream of [Honey Creek Cave](#), a more than 20-mile cavern with an underground waterway thought to be the longest cave in Texas. The cave discharges its clear water into Honey Creek, which forms a series of pools that descend to the confluence with the Guadalupe River. Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) officials have described Honey Creek as “one of the most iconic Hill Country streams.” The land could instead become a preserve or park under a land deal that involves The Nature Conservancy, one of the world’s largest environmental groups that specializes in preserving sensitive areas. Its staff negotiated an option for the purchase of the 515 acres and expects to close around Nov. 1, the TWPD meeting agenda states.

TPWD, working with the affiliated nonprofit [Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation](#), would pay for and acquire part of the tract at closing and will work with TNC to purchase the rest of the tract from the conservation organization over time. The cost of the land sale isn’t known; TPWD’s agenda didn’t include any dollar amounts.



Land owned by Ronnie Urbanczyk can be seen across the rolling hills of the Texas Hill Country and the Guadalupe State Park. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

“Hopefully, if all works well, we’ll have a park out there,” said David Holmes, a friend of landowners Ronnie and Terry Urbanczyk who has worked with them as a consultant on the development. Holmes stressed that nothing has been finalized and the subdivision remains a possibility. “Whatever [Ronnie Urbanczyk] wants to do, we can do,” Holmes said. “We’ve closed no doors.”

The most serious obstacle to the deal, Holmes said, is a contract to supply water to the development signed in 2018 with Flagstone Water Company, affiliated with Boerne-based Texas Water Supply Co. “If there’s no subdivision, then Ronnie doesn’t need the water,” Holmes said. “We would like to be released from the contract.”

Kevin Meier, president of Texas Water Supply Co., declined to comment on the water contract Wednesday.

In a Tuesday phone interview, Holmes declined to provide financial details of the land sale, though he said it would be more lucrative for the Urbanczyks to develop the property rather than sell it to conservation organizations. The couples’ generosity is “definitely a key factor” in allowing the land to remain undeveloped, Holmes said.

“I think the common denominator for TPWD and the neighborhood and all the constituents is that we want to respect the environment of Honey Creek,” Holmes said.



A trip inside Honey Creek Cave, the longest in Texas

The San Antonio Report first [reported the story](#) of the proposed development and a sewage discharge permit planned for Honey Creek in August 2018. At that time, the Urbanczyks were planning a sewage treatment plant that would discharge an average of 500,000 gallons of treated wastewater per day down the creek.

News of the development spurred an opposition effort involving the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA), Texas Cave Management Association, Bulverde Neighborhoods for Clean Water, and nearby landowners. In 2019, the Urbanczyks withdrew the discharge application and [applied for a new type of sewage permit](#) that would avoid discharging any water down Honey Creek, except during emergencies.

But opponents kept up their fight, arguing that building a dense subdivision at Honey Creek's headwaters would inevitably lead to fertilizers, herbicides, motor oil, detergents, trash, personal care products, and pharmaceuticals being washed down the creek. Opponents [challenged the new permit](#) through a contested case proceeding, where it went before a state administrative law judge earlier this year.

On March 30, both sides signed a [settlement deal](#) that would require the development to use ultraviolet light for disinfection, a less risky but more expensive choice than chlorine. The agreement included stricter pollution limits, water conservation requirements, and a cap of 1,640 homes, among other items. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the agency responsible for sewage plant regulations, issued a permit for the development on May 24. The permit would require treated wastewater to be dispersed underground via a drip irrigation system, rather than flushed down Honey Creek.

"So many people would be eternally grateful" if the land were to become a park, said Annalisa Peace, director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, in a Tuesday phone call. "It's such a unique site in such a unique area and it's something that's just so worthy of preservation," Peace said.