

THE CENTRAL TEXAS GREENPRINT FOR GROWTH CONSERVATION & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR BASTROP COUNTY



THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND
CONSERVING LAND FOR PEOPLE



BASTROP COUNTY



“PEOPLE WANT TO FIND WAYS TO PRESERVE THE SMALL-TOWN AND AGRICULTURE FEEL. URBAN FOLKS ARE EVEN SAYING THIS.”

—PATI JACOBS, FARMER,
CO-OWNER BASTROP
CATTLE COMPANY

Bastrop County lives up to the Texas slogan of a “whole other country,” because of the rare nature of its defining landscapes. An island forest, known as the Lost Pines, sits 100 miles west of the East Texas piney woods. A loblolly oasis, it is home to more than 1,000 species of plants and animals and provides shelter to the endangered Houston toad. The Colorado River corridor offers a haven for wildlife, including the highest concentration of bird diversity in the United States. The Yegua Knobs is an uncommon interior swamp. With a rich agricultural history, the Main Street cities of Bastrop and Elgin, and places like Smithville that were built by the railroad, the county seeks to protect its unmanufactured small-town charm even in the face of rapid growth.

Set upon the Texas Gulf Coastal Plains, Bastrop County built its economy on agriculture, brick making, timber, and the railroads. But the cyclical nature of those industries has yielded to manufacturing and service-sector jobs and to encroaching growth from Austin that threatens the county’s unique character and pushes natural resources to their limits.

Bastrop County’s rural character and natural beauty draw in new residents. Between 2000 and 2008, Bastrop County’s population climbed from 57,716 to 73,491. This growth spurt is expected to increase by another 30 percent by 2025 and is the reason public spending is directed primarily toward law enforcement, roads and bridges, and other pressing infrastructure needs. Most of the new development is focused in the incorporated cities of Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville and the unincorporated areas of McDade, Cedar Creek, U.S. 290, and S.H. 71. Continued growth will only increase pressure on Bastrop County’s natural resources and exaggerate the negative impacts of naturally occurring events such as drought and fire.

Bastrop County, like much of the Central Texas region, grapples with the question, “How do we grow responsibly while protecting our drinking water, creating safe spaces for our children to play, and conserving places like those iconic Lost Pines that can only be found here?”

An effort to address regional land use, transportation, and environmental issues began in 2002 with Envision Central Texas (ECT). Many thousands of Central Texans participated in the ECT visioning process and expressed their desire to shape future growth in ways that will preserve their unique character and natural resources. Recognizing that strategies to encourage growth away from precious drinking-water supplies and other important

resources require cross-jurisdictional cooperation, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), ECT, and the Capitol Area Council of Governments (CAPCOG) launched a regional Greenprint in Bastrop, Caldwell, and Hays, where new growth and development are occurring but also where opportunity still exists to respond proactively. By taking a holistic view of the region's "green infrastructure," the Central Texas Greenprint for Growth identifies high-priority opportunities for land conservation to meet local parks and open space needs and ecosystem protection goals, and to highlight areas for directing responsible growth away from sensitive resources.

As part of the Central Texas Greenprint for Growth, TPL and a technical team of local experts developed individual opportunity maps for each of the six community goals identified by Bastrop County citizens and one composite map showing where multiple goals overlapped:

- Protect Water Quality and Quantity
- Conserve Farm and Ranch Lands
- Protect Sensitive Ecological Areas
- Enhance Park and Recreation Opportunities
- Protect Scenic Corridors
- Protect Cultural/Historic Resources

The most intense colors indicate the best opportunities for conservation, with dark red ranking the highest.

The role of these maps, however, is much broader than highlighting conservation opportunities. Developed with broad stakeholder consensus, these maps are useful to decision makers as they guide future infrastructure investments, such as schools, roads, bridges, and housing, away from sensitive areas such as aquifer recharge zones and endangered species habitat. While development is essential to a thriving economy, it also can fragment and destroy healthy, functioning ecosystems, as well as alter the unique character of communities that is essential to support tourism. Therefore, these maps also reveal opportunities for:

- New parks and facilities to meet growing population needs;
- Areas that provide recreational and habitat connectivity that enhances eco- and agri-tourism;
- Target areas for environmental enhancement or restoration to improve business retention and recruitment;
- Concentrations of farm and ranch lands to maintain their economic viability and buffer them from encroaching development;
- Encouraging sustainable growth that preserves Bastrop County's unique identity.

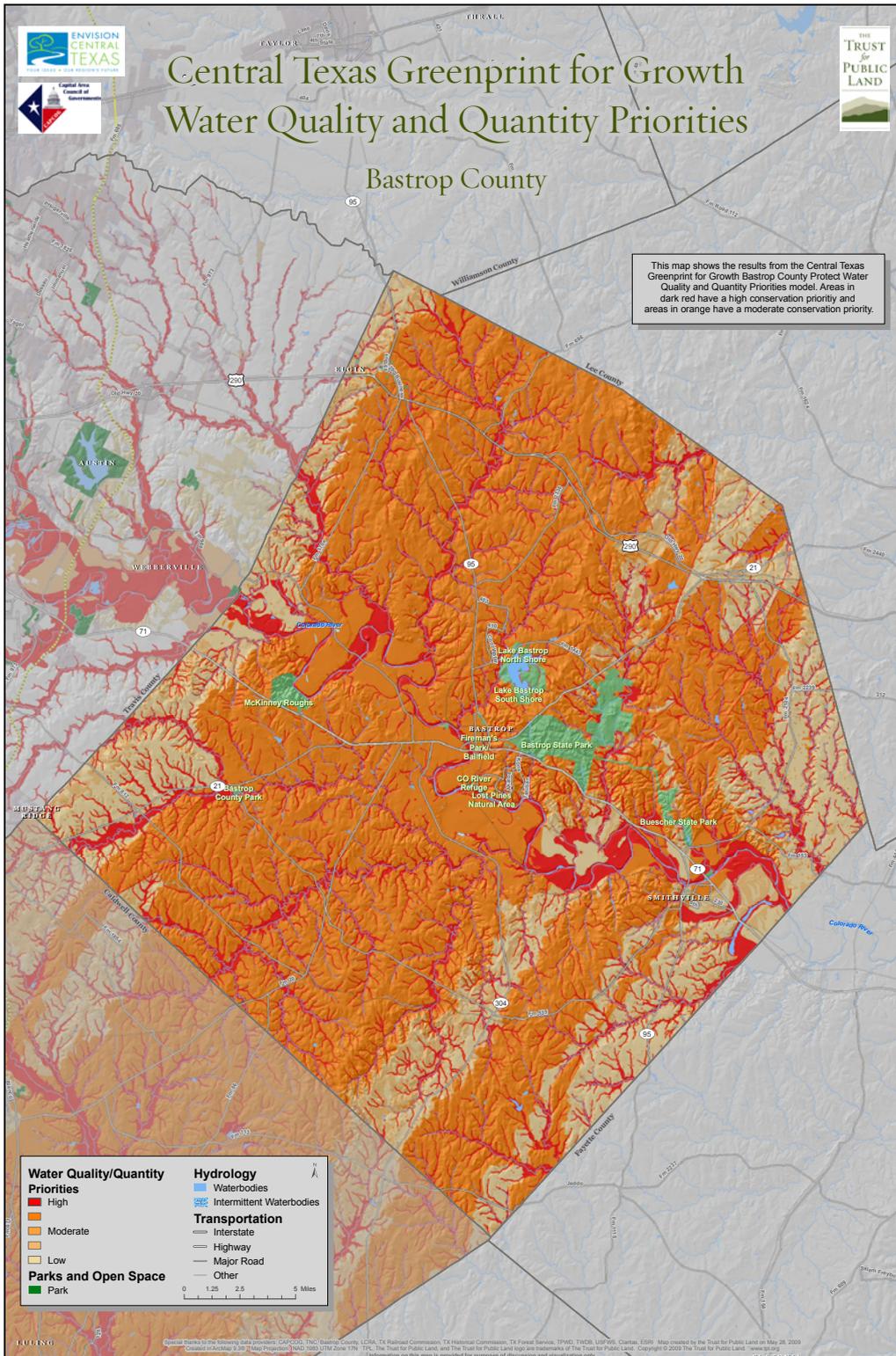
WHAT IS A GREENPRINT?

You need a blueprint to build a house. You need a Greenprint to build a sustainable community. A Greenprint represents The Trust for Public Land's unique application of Geographic Information System (GIS) modeling and mapping technology that identifies the best places for conservation, resource management, and growth to occur. While seeking to protect natural, historical, cultural, and recreational resources, a Greenprint also provides a "best path" approach for development.

The Greenprint process involves several steps:

- (1) constituency building;
- (2) goal setting;
- (3) data gathering and analysis;
- (4) GIS modeling and mapping; and
- (5) identifying practical strategies for goal implementation.

The result can include a dynamic, interactive web-based tool that helps leaders make informed land-use decisions based on community values, which, in turn, promote economically vibrant, healthy, and attractive communities.



PROTECTING WATER QUALITY

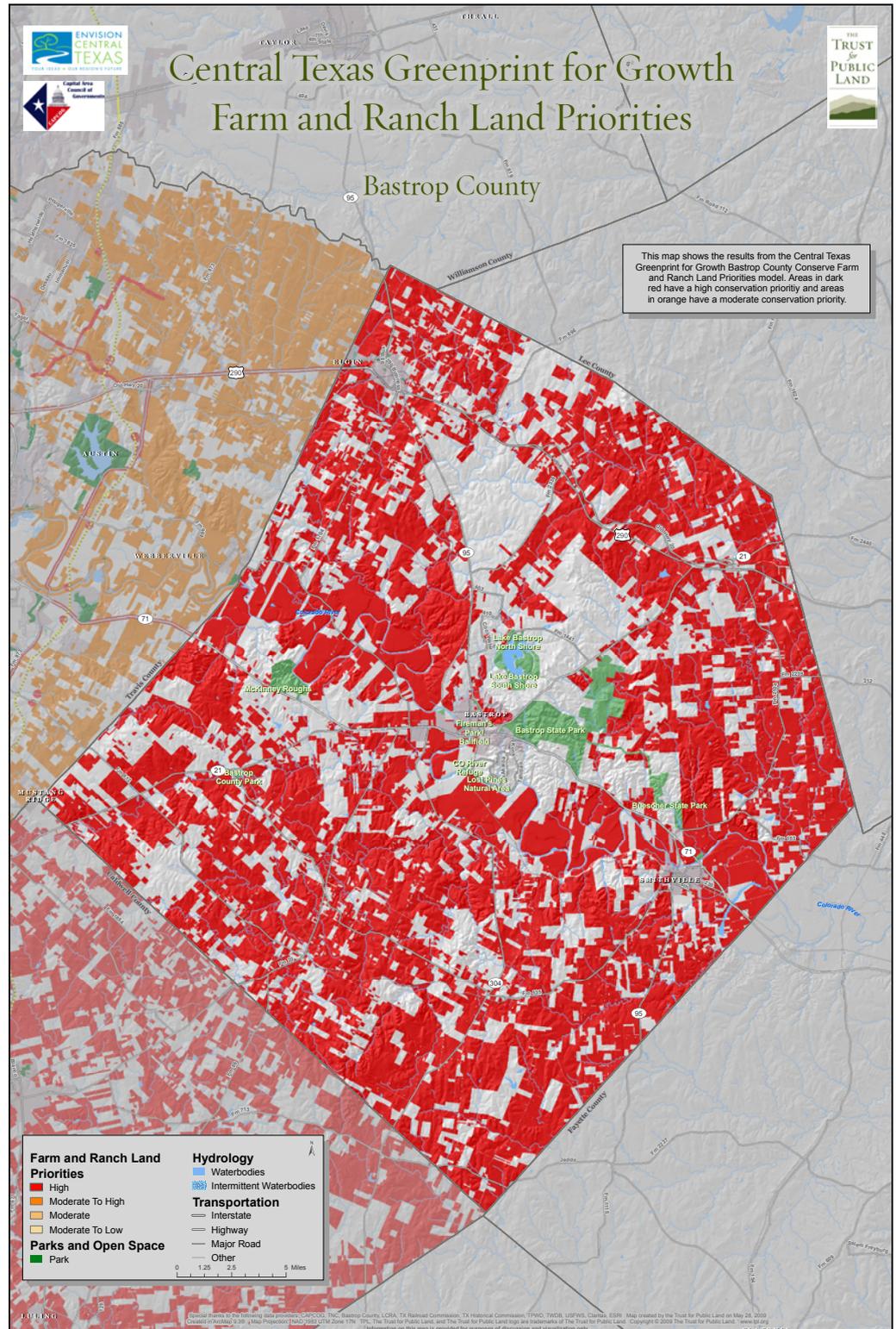
The Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer provides the bulk of the drinking water to Bastrop County residents. While the water quality remains good at this time, some water-level decline has been recorded. Continuing drought conditions in the region exacerbate the situation. Surface waters, such as Lake Bastrop, relieve some of the pressure on groundwater sources, but as municipal demands grow, farmland conversions take place, and utilities require more for electric generation, these sources will be tapped out.

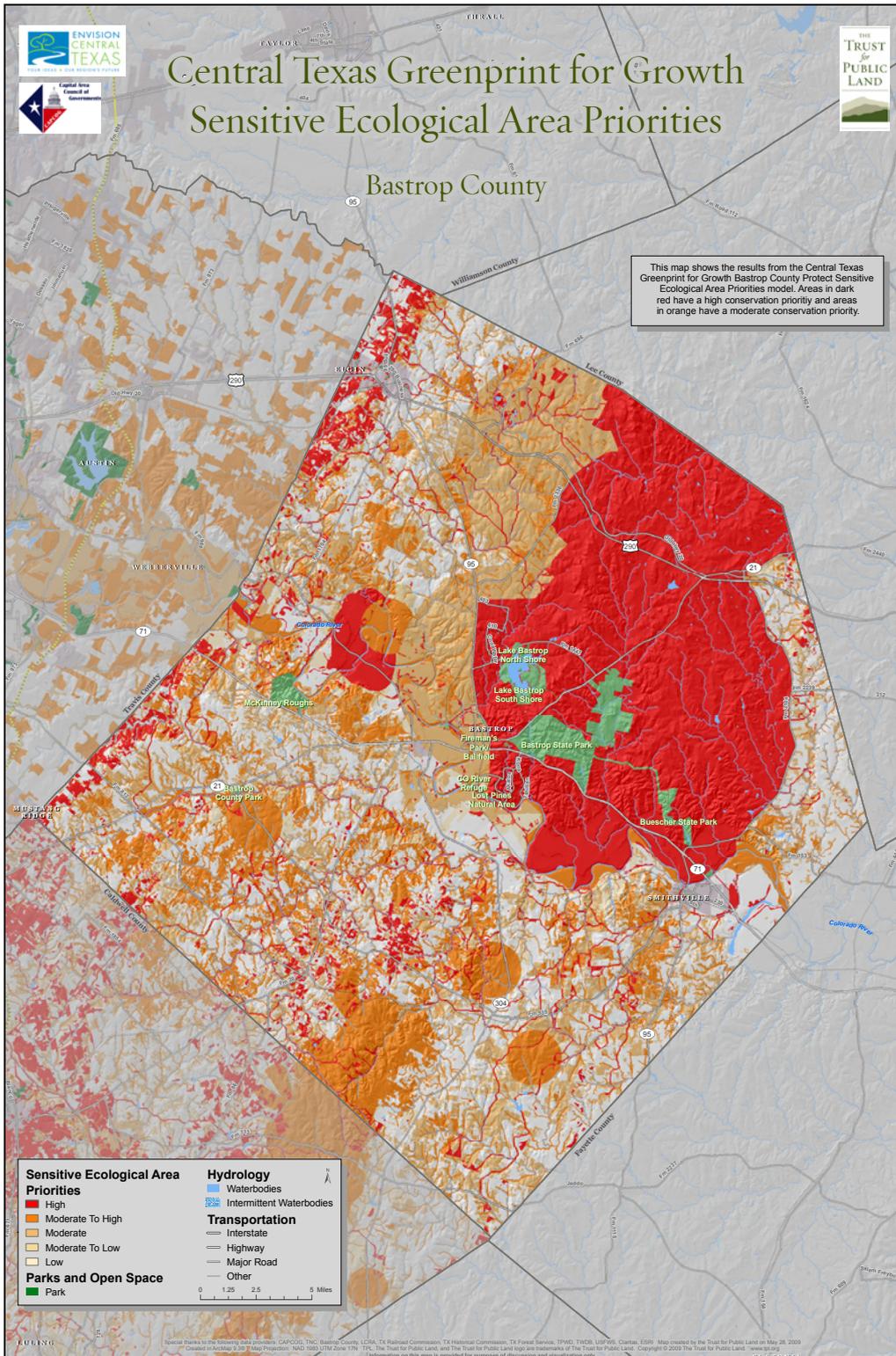
Bastrop County citizens ranked protecting water quality and quantity as the highest priority of the Greenprint. Focusing on rivers, streams, creeks, floodplains, springs, and forested uplands, citizens identified more than 455,500 acres—almost 80 percent of the entire county land area—as high-priority opportunities for conservation. To date, only 2 percent have been protected. While it is unrealistic to think that all of these lands will be preserved, ample opportunity exists for Bastrop County to take proactive steps to maintain its water quality and quantity for current and future generations.

RIGHT: Equestrian trail enthusiasts at McKinney Roughs Nature Park. PHOTO BY ROLF NUSSBAUMER.

CONSERVING FARM AND RANCH LANDS

Conserving farm and ranch lands was identified as one of the top three goals through the public process for Opportunity Bastrop County. Bastrop County citizens involved in the Greenprint agreed, ranking the preservation of a traditional economy and a rural way of life as their second-highest priority. The dark red and orange areas highlight where farm and ranch lands could be protected in large clusters to support this livelihood and buffer against encroaching development. Almost 345,000 acres of land were highlighted as opportunities for conservation, but only 0.1 percent of those have been protected through a working land easement, which would guarantee the continuance of their existing use.





PROTECTING SENSITIVE ECOLOGICAL AREAS

Bastrop County's true wealth lies in the diversity of its natural resources and landscapes. The Colorado River riparian ecosystem, home to the highest bird diversity in Central Texas and a magnet for paddlers, runs from the northwest corner of the county to the southeast. The Lost Pines forestlands, so named because of their isolation from the main stand of East Texas loblolly pines, provide critical habitat for the federally endangered Houston toad. The Yegua Knobbs Bog offers a rare swamplike experience in the heart of the state. Add to these the sandhills ecosystem that rolls into uplands and broken hills, and the fertile blackland prairie with waxy clay soils and tall grasses.

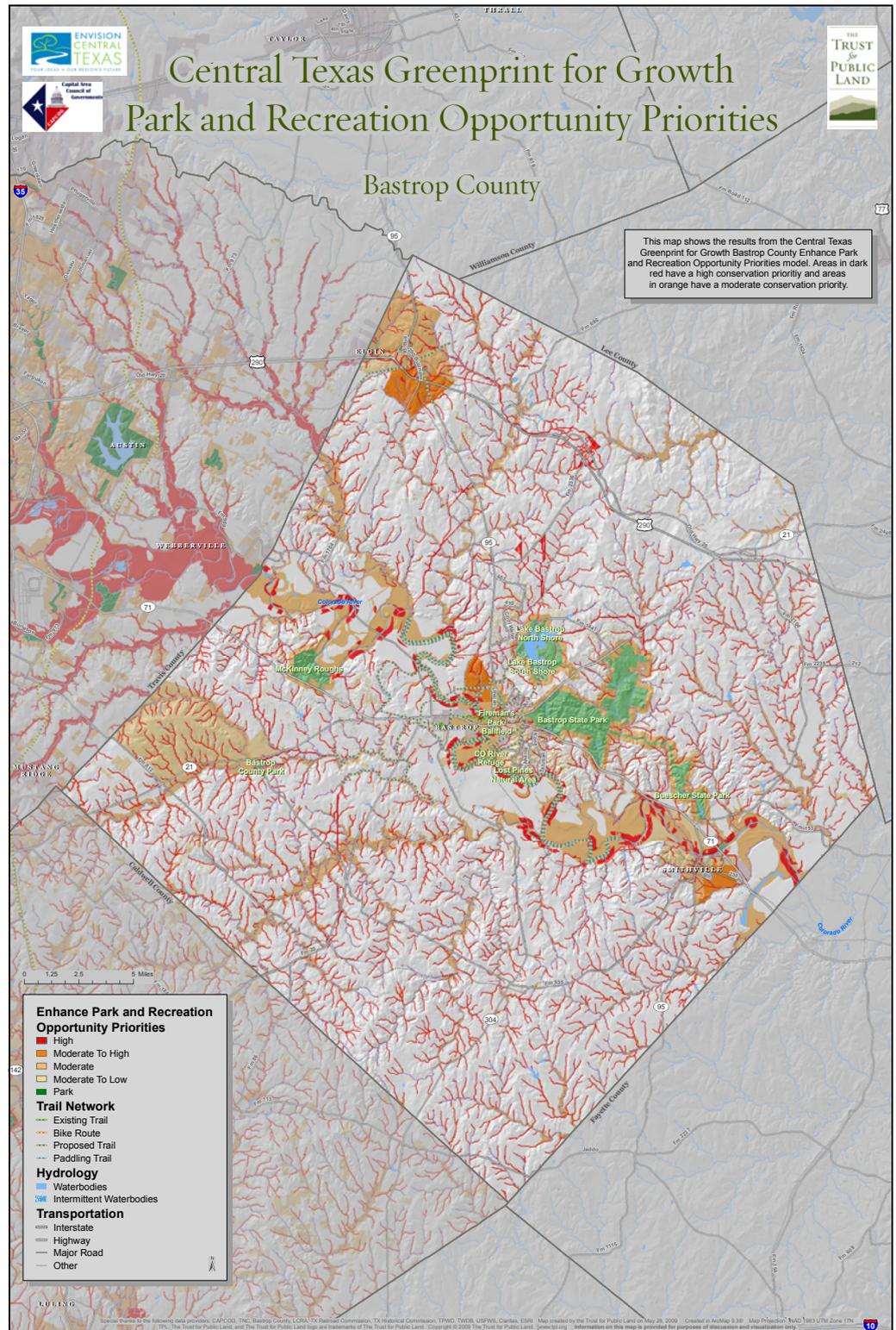
More than 300,000 acres of sensitive ecological areas are highlighted as high-priority opportunities in the Greenprint. Many of these are adjacent to already protected areas that support species, or provide corridors that best protect habitat connectivity. Still, only 3 percent of these lands have been conserved. One signature preservation success is enjoyed at the Colorado River Refuge, a 60-acre public nature preserve with 1.5 miles of Colorado River frontage, rock outcroppings, and cathedral-like tree canopy.

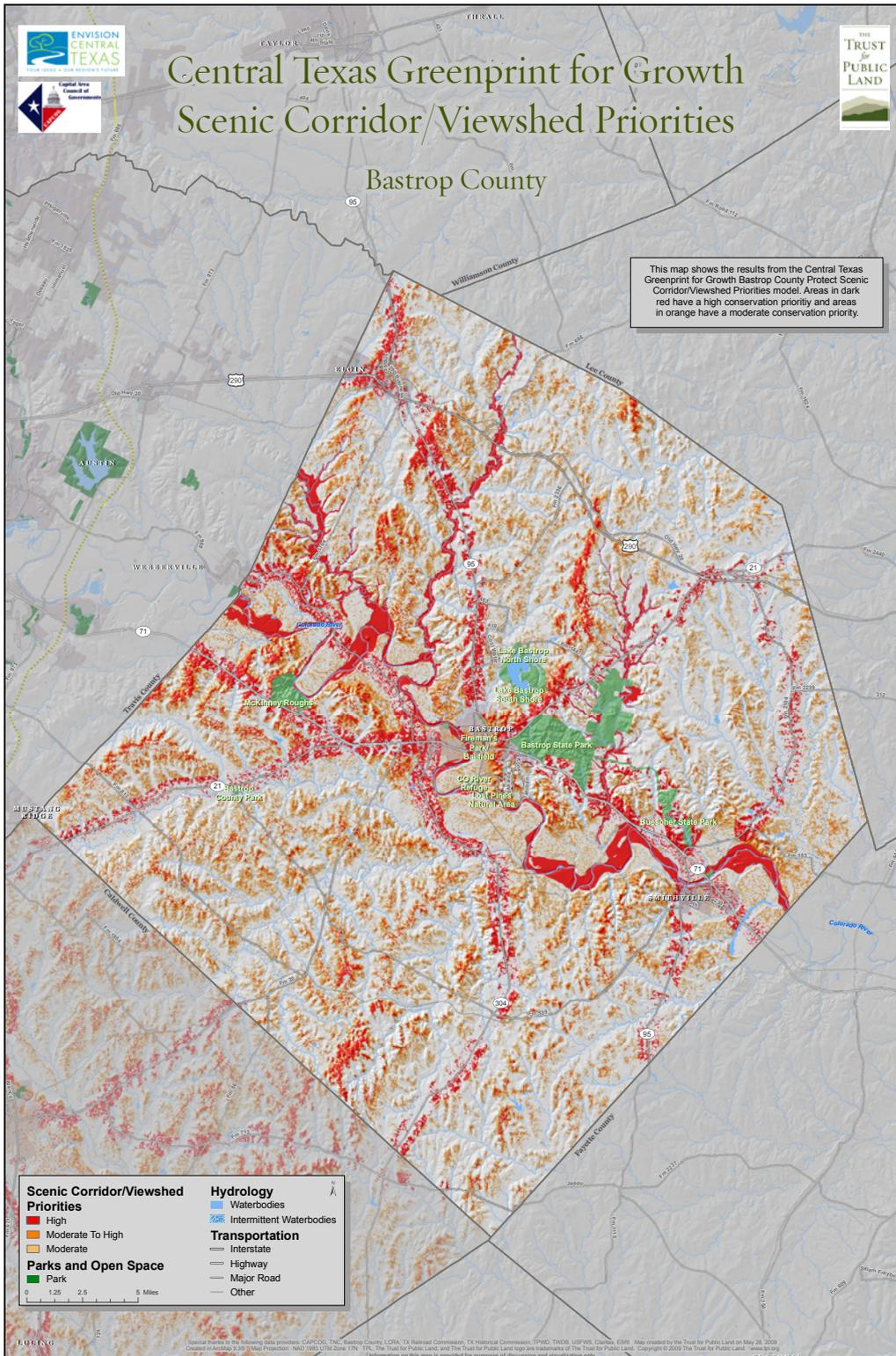
ENHANCING PARKS AND RECREATIONAL AREAS

The countywide strategic plan, Opportunity Bastrop County, listed three key goals, one being the creation of additional parks, especially river access points to build the county's potential as an ecotourism destination. Bastrop County residents have shown an increasing interest in parks and open space since the first county park was completed in the Cedar Creek area, and the Lower Colorado River Authority's (LCRA) visitor records show an increasing trend of park usage in the county.

Through state, local, and nonprofit organizations, Bastrop County residents enjoy almost 136 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, a rather high level of service. But these areas rest primarily in Bastrop State Park and the LCRA's McKinney Roughs Nature Center. For a growing county, these sites do not connect to where people live, nor do they provide the community park facilities needed by neighborhoods and towns.

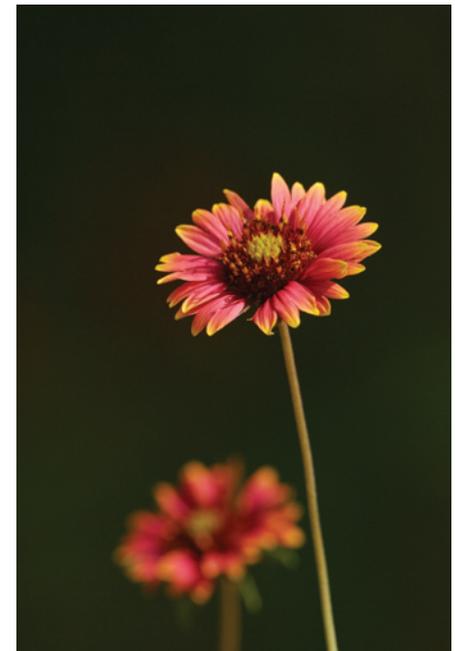
The Greenprint highlights almost 70,000 acres of additional parkland priorities, many of which are near population centers, that would expand or enhance already protected lands and would provide recreational opportunities along river corridors, particularly the Colorado. More than 98 percent of these lands remain unprotected; thus, ample opportunity exists for enhanced recreational and open spaces.





PROTECTING SCENIC CORRIDORS

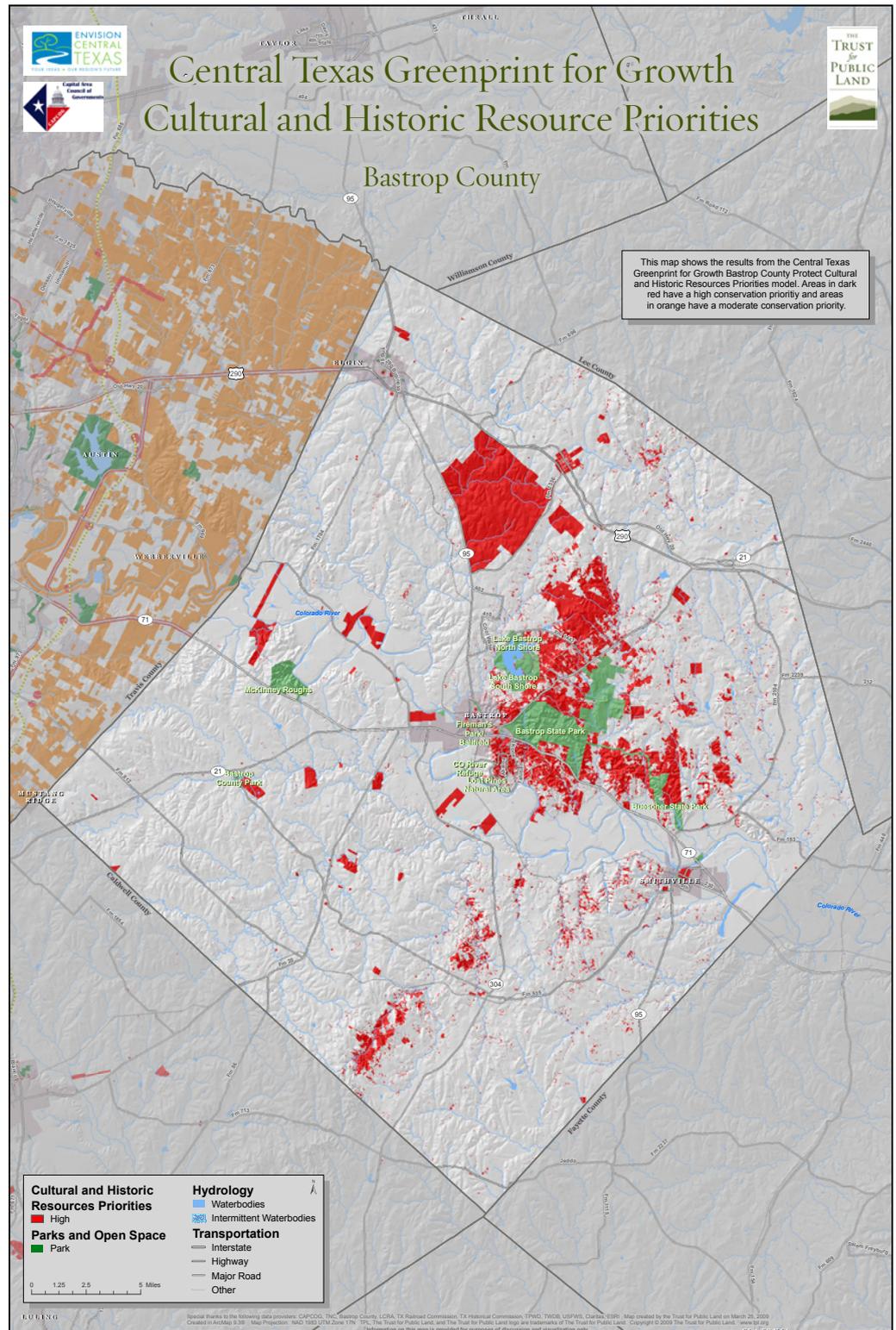
Taking a Sunday drive often means leaving the cities and heading to the open road, down routes that celebrate the rolling hills and take in views of golden fields, tall trees, and winding waterways. The drive on S.H. 21 east out of Bastrop through the Lost Pines is one of Texas' most beautiful drives. The Colorado River and Wilbarger Creek represent iconic scenic corridors to Bastrop County citizens and represent high priorities within the 98,735 acres identified as important to protect in the Greenprint. Three percent of these acres have been conserved, through the state, the county, or the federal government. These community gateways are critical to move people—not just cars—and are draws for recreation and tourism.



PROTECT CULTURAL AND HISTORIC RESOURCES

Bastrop County citizens recognized landmark cultural and historic sites as important to protect, to maintain community character and to honor the area's past. Bastrop State Park was designated as a National Historic Landmark because it bears the hallmarks of Civilian Conservation Corps work from the 1930s. The Texas Historical Commission named both Bastrop and Elgin as Main Streets because of their wealth of historic buildings, agricultural and manufacturing histories, and economic development potential. Smithville's gingerbread houses and ghost signs on the sides of old brick buildings have often starred in Hollywood films, creating a cottage film industry. The Greenprint identified more than 54,000 acres of land to buffer existing conservation easements, cemeteries, military facilities, and historic sites and districts. Bastrop County already has preserved 10 percent of these high-priority lands, the highest in the Central Texas region.

LEFT: Wildflowers in the Colorado River Refuge. PHOTO BY ROLF NUSSBAUMER.



OVERALL CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES



The Overall Conservation Opportunities map highlights in dark red and orange the areas of the county where multiple Greenprint goals overlap, based on the weights established by Bastrop County citizens:

Protect Water Quality and Quantity	27%
Preserve Farm and Ranchlands	19%
Protect Sensitive Ecological Areas	17%
Enhance Recreation Opportunities	15%
Protect Scenic Corridors and Viewsheds	13%
Protect Cultural Resources and Historic Sites	9%

The overall analysis identified almost 110,500 acres of land, predominantly in the Lost Pines area, as high priority for conservation because of their water quality, sensitive ecological, recreational opportunity, and cultural resource attributes. Intersecting goals also are highlighted along the Colorado River and its tributaries. These identified areas show where Bastrop County can spend its financial resources most effectively and efficiently on land conservation. However, Greenprint goals will not be achieved through land conservation alone. A willing-seller conservation program is only one step toward Greenprint implementation; the rest requires regional cooperation, an engaged public, and private-public partnerships. To this end, Bastrop County citizens recommended a number of strategic actions:

Action 1. Create developer incentives by encouraging the county and municipalities to adopt compatible conservation subdivision ordinances; streamline development approval processes for projects that incorporate open space dedications; and establish a transfer of development rights (TDR) program that will allow for increased densities in developed areas in exchange for protection of important resources, such as farmland and riverfront.

Action 2. Form public-private partnerships among cities, county, land trusts, master naturalists, and other groups or individuals to provide information, access, and resources for conservation-minded developers and ecotourism promoters. These partnerships could extend to corporations, chambers of commerce, and school districts to jointly acquire, develop, maintain, and program new parks and facilities, trails and greenways, and nature preserves. The Greenprint can serve as an outreach tool to potential partners.

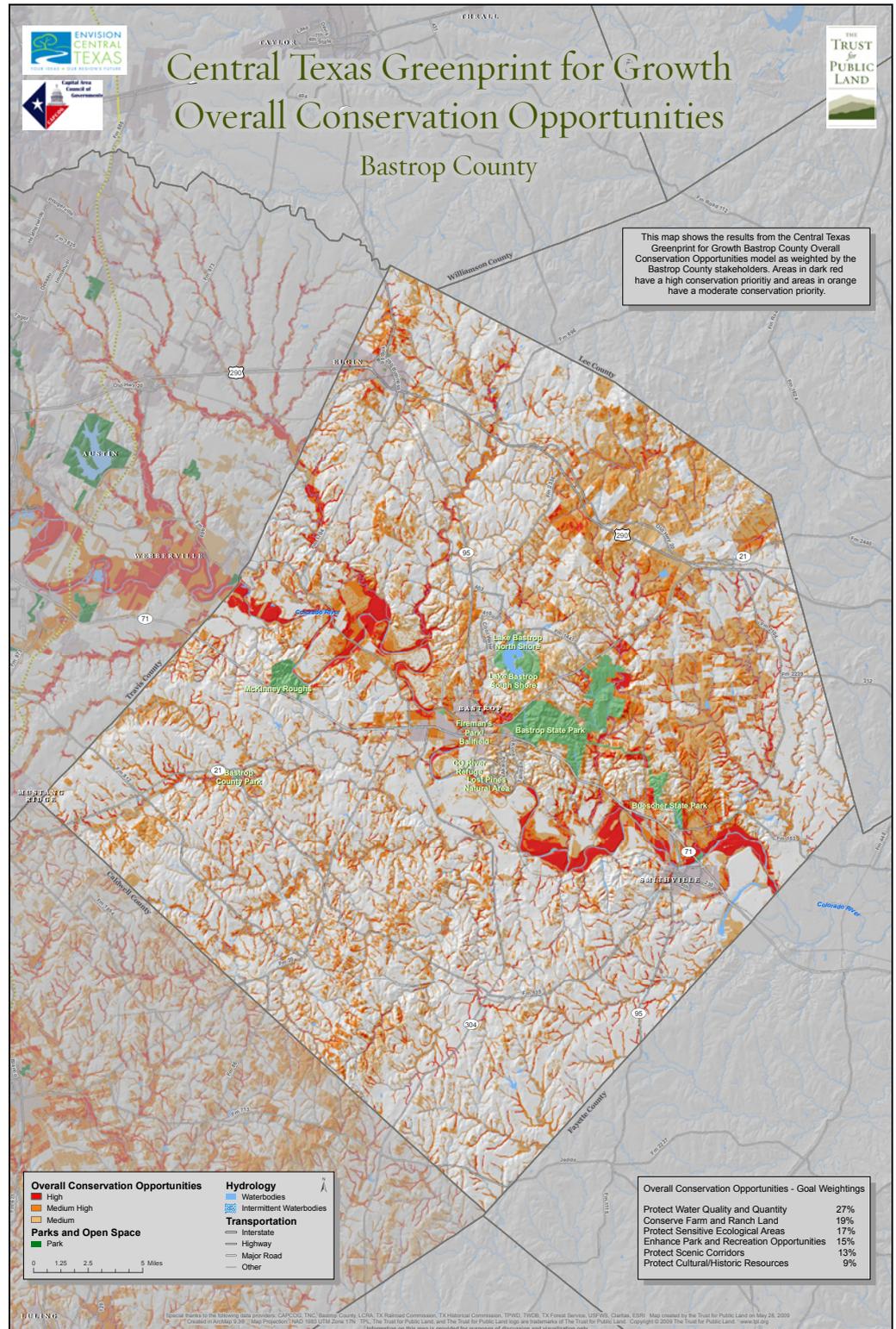
Action 3. Weave a funding quilt by seeking a mixture of federal, state, local, and private funds to support land acquisition, maintenance, and operations of parks and open space. This step may include dedicating a portion of the hotel occupancy tax toward parks, organizing a grassroots campaign to support a local bond measure for conservation, adopting a parkland dedication ordinance that requires developers to provide parks or contribute a fee in-lieu-of, and identifying projects that garner state open space grant funding.

Action 4. Increase the number of and improve the maintenance of local parks by conducting a needs assessment and a park equity analysis to determine service gaps, creating a “Friend of” organization or regional park task force to focus on this issue, and developing a countywide recreation and parks master plan.

Action 5. Increase awareness of the economic, social, environmental, and personal benefits of recreation and conservation to Bastrop County through outreach to schools, information tools in public libraries, and celebrations/special events.

ABOVE: The Lost Pines are an iconic and treasured landscape, providing a wealth of cultural, recreational, and ecological resources.
PHOTO BY ROLF NUSSBAUMER.

The Central Texas Greenprint for Growth offers a vision for the future of Bastrop County and the surrounding areas. Its ultimate success depends upon the sustained commitment and follow-through by citizens and their representatives.



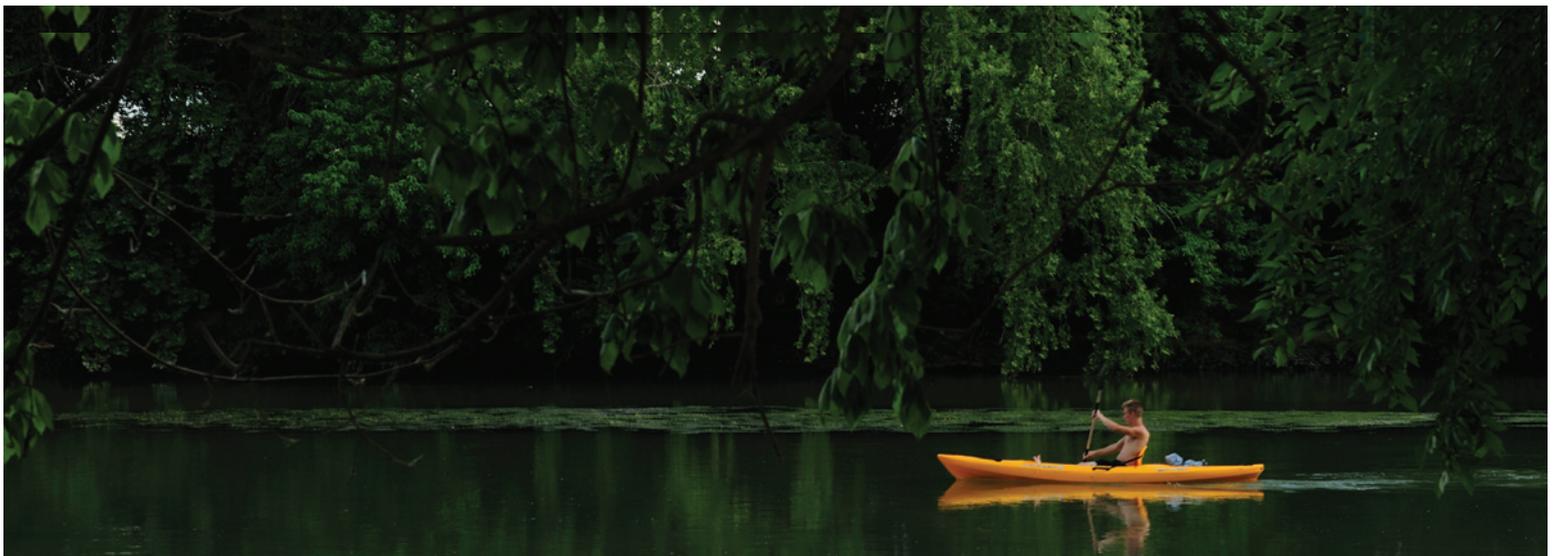
The *Central Texas Greenprint for Growth* represents a partnership of The Trust for Public Land, the Capital Area Council of Governments, Envision Central Texas, and the constituent communities of Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, and Travis counties. The project partners gratefully acknowledge the following supporters for their generous contributions to this project:

Federal Highway Administration • Lower Colorado River Authority • Shield-Ayres Foundation
Bastrop County • Caldwell County • Hays County

The project partners also wish to thank the members of the Central Texas Greenprint Regional Steering Committee, the Technical Advisory Team, and the Bastrop County Stakeholders Group. A full list of names for those who provided their time, energy, and enthusiasm is available in the *Central Texas Greenprint for Growth Report*, which is available for download at www.tpl.org/centraltxgreenprint.

For more information about the *Central Texas Greenprint for Growth*, contact Envision Central Texas, 6800 Burleson Road, Bldg. 310, Suite 165, Austin, TX 78744 (512) 916-6037, www.envisioncentraltexas.org, or The Trust for Public Land, Texas State Office, 816 Congress Avenue, Suite 1680, Austin, TX 78701 (512) 478-4644. The full versions of the *Central Texas Greenprint for Growth* and the *Travis County Greenprint for Growth* reports are available for download at www.tpl.org/centraltxgreenprint. Central Texas Greenprint maps will be maintained by the Capitol Area Council of Governments, www.capcog.org.

The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.



ABOVE: Paddler exploring the Colorado River. PHOTO BY ROLF NUSSBAUMER.