

The environmental commission discussed creating a new municipal district in Hays County that could alleviate developmental pressure in Austin. However, implementing this plan would mean making amendments to the Save Our Springs Ordinance that protects conservation land.

“What this applicant is proposing to do is to bring the entire property of Hays County into what's called the limited purpose zoning jurisdiction, which would prevent them from being able to remove themselves again,” said Liz Johnston, environmental policy program manager at the Watershed Protection Department. “This would lock in environmental regulations, but in exchange for that, they're asking for additional impervious cover than what would normally be allowed by the Save Our Springs Ordinance.”

The residential project Hays Commons, backed by MileStone Community Builders, aims to offer a series of pristine neighborhoods with lush parklands. However, environmentalists from the Save Our Springs Alliance said they are concerned that the company's request for increased impervious cover, development that blocks water from entering the ground, could damage the Edwards Aquifer and Barton Springs. City staff have recommended approving the amendment to the Save Our Springs Ordinance as long as the project follows a series of proposed environmental considerations.

“This might take some pressure off of the east side, although I suspect everywhere in Austin is going to see growth in single family units,” Johnston said.

Hays Commons would need to comply with the county's environmental regulations such as the inclusion of creek setbacks that act as pollution protecting buffer zones. According to Johnston, these areas would preserve critical water sources like Little Bear Creek while inviting the community to connect with nature.

“There would be a system of trails that people would be able to access,” Johnston said. “One of the biggest wins, in my opinion, for this project, is to be able to have that publicly accessible open space.”

However, past land development projects started in conserved areas have ceased after environmentalists raised concerns. In 2019, the City of Austin website stated that voters have approved over \$150 million in funding for the conservation of sensitive lands over the Edwards Aquifer. Roy Waley, realtor and conservation chair for the Austin Regional Group of the Sierra Club, said he believes Austin's charming landscape is dwindling as more people move closer to Central Texas.

“One way to look at it for realtors in general is the old parable about killing the goose that laid the golden egg,” Waley said. “If we keep saying come here, and we kill the geese, the golden egg

goes away. The fact that we have spent hundreds of millions of dollars protecting the aquifer and what it brings to Austin means we need to protect it one more time.”

The Save Our Springs Alliance has played a crucial role in the continued protection of this aquifer. Since 1992, they have been the only public interest legal group dedicated to shielding Edwards Aquifer from overdevelopment and pollution.

“The capital was located here, in major part, because it was somewhat centrally located, but especially because Barton Springs provided a reliable source of water for drinking and for milling,” Bill Bunch, executive director, co-founder and staff attorney of the Save Our Springs Alliance said.

The Edwards Aquifer feeds all of the largest springs in Texas. According to the Edwards Aquifer Authority, openings in the rock provide shelter to over 40 species of aquatic life. It is composed of limestone and is a karst aquifer, meaning it is very porous and transmits large amounts of water. However, its porosity makes it susceptible to polluted rainwater and wastewater runoff that can deeply impact the aquifer’s vitality.

“It’s more vulnerable to pollution than any other major aquifer in the state,” Bunch said. “That’s why it’s absolutely critical that we limit the amount of development over the watershed for Barton Springs.”

Both Waley and Bunch urge all Austinites to speak up for what they believe in regarding this issue.

“Participating in civic affairs at the local level is critical if we’re going to have any hope of a sustainable future,” Bunch said.