

# **Opportunity Bastrop County**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Environmental Quality and Growth Management</b>	<b>2</b>
Farm and ranch lands and wildlife habitat preservation	2
Water quality and quantity protection	8
Strengthening of on-site sewage system regulations	10
<b>Transportation Enhancements</b>	<b>11</b>
Roadway and safety improvements	11
Road maintenance and expansion	12
Transit system improvements	12
Regional systems (CAMPO or Rural Mobility Authority)	13
<b>Economic Development and Educational Opportunities</b>	<b>15</b>
Strong relationship with Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville	15
Economic Development groups	
Tourism Development	16
Higher Education Opportunities	16
<b>Public Safety</b>	<b>18</b>
Crime and accident prevention	18
Continue support of volunteer fire departments and Emergency Services Districts	18
Improve emergency medical services	19
<b>Services for low income, elderly, and mobility impaired residents</b>	<b>20</b>
Community clinics in Bastrop and Smithville and potential to open a clinic in Elgin	20
Mobile health clinics to serve rural areas	20
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>22</b>

## **Opportunity Bastrop County Bastrop County Strategic Plan**

### **Executive Summary**

Bastrop County is experiencing the most explosive growth in its modern history as the 9<sup>th</sup> fastest growing county in Texas. This growth is creating challenges as well as opportunities. People choose to live in Bastrop County because of its peaceful rural character and residents are concerned with how to protect that character while enhancing and improving services and infrastructure.

Opportunity Bastrop County is a strategic plan developed to help maintain and enhance the quality of life that is attracting residents to Bastrop County. The recommendations are based on an extensive public input process and reflect the concerns and priorities of the citizens. Based on this public process, the following areas of interest and initiatives have been identified:

### **Environmental Quality and Growth Management**

- Farm and ranch lands and wildlife habitat preservation
  - Develop conservation subdivision regulations
  - Develop additional parks and greenbelts across the County
  - Preserve agricultural lands and wildlife habitat
  
- Water quality and quantity protection
  - Preserve significant springs and riparian (streamside) habitat
  - Encourage rainwater collection in new development
  - Establish strong relationship with Lost Pines Groundwater Protection District, MUD's, etc.
  
- Strengthening of on-site sewage system regulations

### **Transportation Enhancements**

- Roadway and safety improvements
- Road maintenance and expansion
- Transit system improvements
  - Encourage car / van pooling
  - Establish volunteer driver pool
  - Explore establishing Bastrop County transit
  - Explore commuter rail possibilities with Capital Metro
- Regional Systems (CAMPO or Rural Mobility Authority)

**Economic Development and Educational Opportunities**

- Strong relationship with Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville Economic Development groups
- Tourism Development
- Higher learning opportunities

**Public Safety**

- Crime and accident prevention
- Continue support of Volunteer Fire Departments and Emergency Service Districts
- Improve emergency medical services

**Services for Low Income, Elderly, and Mobility Impaired Residents**

- Community clinics in Bastrop and Smithville and potential to open a clinic in Elgin
- Mobile health clinics to serve rural areas

## **Introduction**

In the Summer of 2006, the Bastrop County Commissioners Court decided to develop a County-wide Strategic Plan that would provide direction for the Court. The Commissioners wanted the plan to be based on public input and priorities rather than being developed internally. To accomplish this, the Commissioners Court appointed a Steering Committee representing a cross-section of County residents. They also requested assistance from LCRA's Community and Economic Development department to facilitate the process.

The Steering Committee organized town hall meetings and encouraged citizen participation in the process as well as ensured the plan recommendations reflected the public input. Five town hall meetings were held across the County to provide opportunities for residents to attend and be heard. The meetings began with a brief presentation about the role of County government and demographic statistics showing the growth of Bastrop County in the last few years. Attendees were encouraged to provide their input on the issues that most concerned them. Appendix A contains the complete notes captured at the Town Hall meetings.

The meetings were well attended and included a broad range of comments from citizens who participated in the planning process. Concerns ranged from environmental issues, public safety, roads, health care, and a host of others. However, there were several common themes that were heard at all of the meetings. The Steering Committee was assisted by LCRA to develop recommendations based on the common themes heard from County residents.

## **Common Themes**

There was a wide variety of concerns identified during the planning process; however, a few common priorities were heard at every meeting. These were the following:

- Environmental quality
- Transportation enhancements
- Recreational opportunities
- Economic development
- Growth management
- Educational opportunities
- Public safety
- Services for low income, elderly, and mobility impaired residents

An over-arching concern identified in the process was to maintain the quality of life and ensure adequate services in the unincorporated areas of Bastrop County. The three cities (Bastrop, Elgin, Smithville) provide many of the services identified in this plan to the citizens within their limits.

The plan will identify specific recommendations for the County to address these issues. Many of them can be addressed by common programs, for instance, parks and recreation will also be addressed as part of the environmental quality recommendations.

## **Environmental Quality and Growth Management**

Participants in the Town Hall meetings were very concerned about environmental issues facing Bastrop County, especially in the face of rapid growth. Concerns included water quality and quantity, air quality, and preservation of farm and ranch land and wildlife habitat. The County has some authority as well as opportunities to address environmental issues. The County should consider the following recommendations to ensure the natural environment of Bastrop County is maintained for future generations. These recommendations would also provide tools to manage growth in the county.

### **Preservation of Farm and Ranch Land and Wildlife Habitat**

Bastrop County has a rural character that is a significant factor in residents' decision to live there. This rural character is increasingly threatened by rapid growth from the Austin metropolitan area into Bastrop County. Agricultural and undeveloped land is being turned into subdivisions at a rapid pace. Residents are concerned about the loss of rural character and negative environmental impacts of development. Key environmental issues facing the County relate to rainwater collection, water conservation, and aquifer recharge. The County needs to encourage subdivisions, cities, and rural areas to use water wisely in order to have adequate water to support expected growth. To ensure environmental protection and preservation of rural character, the County should consider the following recommendations.

- Develop Conservation Subdivision and Water Conservation Regulations
- Develop additional Parks and Greenbelts Across the County
- Work with Land Trusts to Preserve Agricultural Lands and Wildlife Habitat

#### *Develop Conservation Subdivision and Water Conservation Regulations*

In the 2001 session, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 873, which provides additional regulatory authority to counties defined in the bill as 'urban'. These include counties with a population over 700,000 and those adjacent to counties with population over 700,000, which includes Bastrop County. This bill has been interpreted to allow these counties to expand their subdivision regulations to provide for conservation subdivisions. Conservation subdivisions are a growing trend across Texas and the nation. These types of subdivisions allow developers more flexibility in how they develop properties by allowing them to increase the density of development in one area while preserving more of the property as farm and ranch land and wildlife habitat. The cost savings (in stormwater detention facilities, reduced infrastructure costs, etc.) and enhanced values make this type of subdivision attractive to many developers. Included in Appendix B are copies of the Medina County regulations and the draft Travis County regulations.

Conservation subdivisions in a nutshell work very similarly to a golf course subdivision. Instead of laying out a golf course, conservation areas are designated and home sites developed around those. These areas are typically land that cannot be developed due to floodplains, slopes, etc., sensitive environmental features, or particularly scenic or historic sites on the property. The developer is allowed to build at a higher density than is typically allowed because a significant portion of the property as a whole is left undeveloped.

Bastrop County is currently developing a Habitat Conservation Plan for the endangered Houston Toad that provides for conservation subdivisions in the defined habitat area. These standards are currently under review by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and could serve as a model for conservation subdivisions throughout Bastrop County. A conservation ordinance should focus on preserving habitat. This would include focusing on preserving streamside buffers to protect water quality. Also, connectivity of undeveloped land is critical. Adjacent subdivisions should be encouraged to coordinate their designated undeveloped lands to ensure contiguity over large areas rather than isolated patches of land. Developers should also be encouraged to improve the habitat quality when feasible, such as removing non-native species, planting native plants, and related activities.

Growing concern about urban sprawl, cost, etc. are making conservation subdivisions more attractive to developers and consumers alike. Studies have shown that conservation designs are considered more rural in character than conventional subdivisions where there is no public recreational area. These may be maintained by a Homeowners Association, donated to a land trust, or conveyed to local government for use as public land. Some subdivisions have preserved agricultural lands as well.

One benefit to this program is that it has low cost to the County. There will be some cost associated with updating the existing subdivision ordinance; however, it will be fairly minimal, and since standards already exist for the Houston Toad habitat area, these could serve as the basis for the standards county-wide. The result of establishing conservation subdivision regulations is that land will be preserved throughout Bastrop County without costing the County any money because developers will be setting the land aside in their subdivisions. If the County pursues this opportunity, there should be planning so that adjacent properties can develop inter-connected farm and ranch land and wildlife habitats rather than each property developing in a vacuum. In addition, public lands can connect private open space in the subdivisions to create a network of protected farm and ranch land and wildlife habitat across Bastrop County.

In addition to conservation subdivisions, Bastrop County should explore opportunities for moderating commercial growth along major transportation corridors. As more strip centers and commercial development occurs, traffic safety and flow worsen.

#### *Develop Additional Parks and Greenbelts Across the County*

Bastrop County is developing its first County park in the unincorporated community of Cedar Creek. This meets a couple of the priorities identified in this Plan for providing recreational opportunities, services to unincorporated communities, and preserving environmental quality. Residents strongly supported the County expanding its park system to other areas. Not every park will have to be a highly developed facility with ball fields, etc. It may be more appropriate to preserve the open space with walking trails river access points, nature preserves, or wild areas such as creeks for nesting birds and migratory bird feeding. Natural areas require less water and would be appropriate in subdivisions, parks and forest edges where native prairie grasses exist together.

Greenbelts connecting parks and key wildlife habitats should be encouraged in order to enhance wildlife habitats, provide connectivity between communities for pedestrians and cyclists, and to increase connectivity of groundwater recharge zones and wildlife migration. Park areas along the river should encourage use of the river for fishing, canoeing, kayaking, swimming, camping and associated concession important to eco-tourism.

The first step will be to identify those areas most suitable for parks and greenbelt and river access points to be developed. These may be unincorporated areas with few amenities for residents, environmentally sensitive areas, or areas at high risk for overdevelopment. A model to follow is the 'Greenprinting' project recently completed in Travis County. This effort, managed by the Trust for Public Land, involves an extensive evaluation of the area to identify those areas most suitable for protection. These may be environmentally sensitive lands, prime agricultural lands, or culturally significant sites. The priorities are based on public input, so the 'greenprint' focuses on those areas deemed most critical by local citizens. There is an effort underway to expand the project from Travis County to the other counties that were involved in Envision Central Texas and Bastrop County should support this effort. The Pines and Prairie Trust is a local organization that is supporting the efforts of 'greenprinting' in Bastrop County. They have also worked with the County and City of Bastrop to identify and preserve undeveloped and agricultural lands.

As mentioned, park amenities may vary based on locations and needs. Sports fields may be needed in Rockne, while a park near McDade may protect a particularly scenic view. Protection of springs and other environmental features as well as river access should be priorities both from an environmental standpoint and an economic one to enhance tourism on the river. Once priority areas are identified, funding will become the critical issue. Property owners should be contacted to discuss the potential for donating the land. There are a variety of grant programs and other assistance available to help fund park development. Because of the high level of support for parks among citizens who participated in this planning process, a bond issue may be appropriate as well. It will be important to consider the on-going maintenance and program costs when developing new parks because there are fewer grants and other external funding sources for these kinds of expenses. Before moving forward with park development, the County should explore funding for on-going maintenance, including partnerships with private entities, non-profits, and others to provide on-going assistance. Hays County, Travis County, and the City of Austin, have all had great success recently in passing bonds for the protection of farm and ranch land and wildlife habitat. Residents realize the importance of farm and ranch land and wildlife habitat preservation and tend to support it.

The Austin - Bastrop River Corridor Partnership is an excellent resource that the County should coordinate with as they develop a park system. The Partnership is a network of community groups, government agencies, and concerned citizens who are developing a vision for the future of the Colorado River. Their efforts should be supported and County efforts dovetail to achieve more than each group working independently.



Parks, greenbelts and river access points are critical for a number of reasons and should be considered an infrastructure investment rather than just a cost for the County. Greenbelts provide connectivity between communities and parks benefiting both residents and wildlife. In addition, they improve the quality of life, which makes the community more attractive to prospective businesses looking to relocate or entrepreneurs wanting to start a new business. As mentioned above, proximity to parks can increase the value of adjacent properties, which helps offset the value being taken off the tax roles for the park. For these reasons, and the obvious environmental benefits of not developing land, such as increased groundwater recharge, parks are a very attractive opportunity for Bastrop County to meet the growing needs of its residents.

This is not intended to downplay the costs associated with parks, especially parks with significant amenities that require on-going maintenance, such as ball fields, picnic areas, etc. The County will have to ensure there is adequate funding to maintain and patrol parks once they are developed. While grants for park development have become more scarce over time, it is still easier to find funding to build a park than it is to maintain one, so this is a consideration the County will have to make as it begins to expand the park system.

*Work with Land Trusts to Preserve Agricultural Lands and Wildlife Habitat*

Agricultural lands play a more important role than most people realize. They maintain the rural character of a community, provide open space and habitat, and contribute to the local economy. They also cost much less in public services than they provide in property taxes, which is the exact opposite of residential development which costs significantly more in services than it provides in taxes. Farmers and ranchers are often driven to sell their land because of rapidly increasing property values and increased conflicts as neighboring lands develop into subdivisions. People move to the country, but then complain about the noise, odors, and other impacts of neighboring farms and ranches. There is legislation that protects agricultural producers from complaints; however, it is often a challenge to maintain in the face of development pressure. It is critical to identify and preserve prime agricultural lands to maintain the historic character of Bastrop County as well as the other benefits agricultural lands provide.

Land trusts are increasingly active across the country in preserving agricultural and other undeveloped lands. Land trusts sometimes purchase land outright for preservation, or they may simply purchase the development rights of property. Purchase of development rights helps farmers and ranchers by providing them with immediate money they may need and reducing their tax burden because the land is no longer able to be developed. Some public entities also purchase development rights in their jurisdictions. As mentioned above, the Pines and Prairies Trust has been actively involved in this effort in Bastrop County and are a resource that should be utilized in preserving agricultural lands and wildlife habitat.

Bastrop County should encourage land trusts to protect prime agricultural lands and wildlife habitat. This support may be financial, helping to fund their activities, or it may be by accepting ownership of open space, or development rights that are donated by a

land trust. The City of Austin and the State of Texas have both benefited from this type of relationship. Government Canyon State Park was donated by the Nature Conservancy to the State of Texas. This benefits the land trust because they are no longer responsible for the maintenance of property, and the County benefits by obtaining public recreation areas with minimal cost to the County.

In addition to preserving agricultural lands, the County can support agriculture by promoting it as a viable economic engine for Bastrop County. The County can be involved with promoting Bastrop products locally and throughout the State, similar to the Texas Yes program at the State. If local farmers have a viable market for their products, particularly if they are value-added such as organic and sustainable produce, organic grass fed meats, boutique vineyards, and groves, they will have greater incentive to keep farming. Local farmers markets are also becoming a very popular and profitable opportunity and should be supported because of the benefit for local producers. There are currently several active markets in Bastrop County, and these should be supported. Agriculture is an industry and the land is a capital investment for ranchers and farmers. Efforts should be made to keep appraisal values moderated to help these producers keep their land. Because agricultural lands contribute more in property taxes than they cost in services, the County should explore opportunities to extend the agricultural exemption to reflect these benefits.

### **Water Quality and Quantity Protection**

The population of Bastrop County is growing rapidly; unfortunately, the water supply is not. Policies need to be developed now to protect the quantity and quality of water, both surface and ground for future generations. The projects discussed in this Plan will impact water quality and quantity in a positive way. The following projects will help Bastrop County address the need to protect water quality and quantity:

- Identify and preserve significant springs and riparian (streamside) habitat
- Encourage rainwater collection in new development
- Establish strong relationship with Lost Pines Groundwater Conservation Districts, MUD's etc.

#### *Identify and preserve significant springs and riparian (streamside) habitat*

One of the first opportunities can be part of the acquisition of parks and open space. The County should identify significant springs and other riparian features that contribute to water quality and have potential for tourism. These should be high on the list of lands to be preserved. Preserving undeveloped buffers along streams has a significant economic impact by reducing the need for stormwater management because it slows runoff and filters many pollutants before they enter waterways. The cost savings in reduced detention and treatment facilities can offset the cost of preserving this land. These buffers also provide connectivity for wildlife mobility and walking trails along streams and the river. Leaving the river in a more natural state will also enhance its attraction for tourism and river users because they can experience the environment rather than paddling along backyards and fencelines of subdivisions.

*Encourage Rainwater Collection & Water Conservation throughout the County*

As mentioned earlier, rainwater collection and water conservation are key issues if Bastrop County is to have enough water to support anticipated development. Regulations that encourage these initiatives should be written for new developments and encouraged in older developments. In addition, the County should sit as a stakeholder in the work of the Lower Colorado Regional Water Planning Group (LCRWPG – Region K) to ensure adjacent cities and counties have similar objectives and use-per-customer targets. Such conservation plans need to be incorporated into city/county regulations where possible. In addition, the County should encourage the use of native drought resistant plants for lawns and landscaping.

Rainwater collection is becoming more popular as costs have come down on installing new systems. These systems reduce storm water runoff, thus improving water quality because yard waste, oil, etc. is not being washed off of the property. In addition, impacts on adjacent property are reduced because less water is leaving the property and costs go down on drainage improvements. State legislation does not allow for the prohibition of rainwater collection systems, which had been common practice in subdivisions in the past. The County should encourage all new development, especially commercial, to incorporate rainwater collection systems in its design.

One opportunity to encourage this may be to review the existing drainage regulations and storm water standards. If developers agree to incorporate rainwater collection, the standards may be relaxed because runoff will be captured by the system rather than having to be handled as storm water runoff. This has been successful in many communities across the state and country. The water can then be used for irrigation of the landscaping, which ultimately helps in aquifer recharge and reduces water usage and cost as well. Developers see a cost benefit in installing a system because it is less expensive than additional drainage improvements and the businesses benefit from reduced water costs in the long term, and the aquifer receives incremental recharge of water that might otherwise run off the land before being adequately captured.

Homebuilders can incorporate systems and use native plants for landscaping and tout the environmental benefits and reduced water costs associated with the new homes. This water can then be used for irrigation of yards and landscaping. Developers may choose to require this of any homebuilders in their subdivision to reduce their costs in storm water management facilities. Homebuyers may pay a little more up front, but they will have reduced water costs in the long run since yard watering is the largest single domestic water user, thus driving monthly water bills higher.

Rainwater collection is a double benefit because it reduces runoff, thus minimizing negative impacts of new development. It also reduces water use because recycled rainwater is used for watering lawns rather than treated water. It also will help recharge area aquifers because the rainwater is released more slowly during irrigation so it has time to percolate into the aquifer rather than running off into streams and the river during storm events.

*Establish strong relationship with Lost Pines Groundwater Conservation District and MUD's*

One of the concerns voiced at several meetings was the 'over pumping' of groundwater (when more water is taken from the aquifer than is replenished). As the population grows, and with the potential for groundwater to be pumped out of the County, this will become an even greater challenge. Groundwater provides municipal drinking water for most city and rural residents in the County. Springs along the river also provide a considerable portion of its total flow after it leaves Travis County, especially in times of drought and low water releases from the Highland Lakes. This flow supports river floating sports and dilutes Austin's effluent. Increased groundwater pumping may result in these springs drying up and reducing surface water in the Colorado River and other streams in the County.

Texas is somewhat unique in that there is limited control over groundwater pumping. Typically, property owners own the water beneath their land. This was not a problem when the population was small and there were not very many wells. Now, there are more wells being drilled resulting in more conflict among well owners. Fortunately, Bastrop County is in the Lost Pines Groundwater Conservation District (LPGCD) which is charged with providing some oversight. Laws regarding Groundwater Districts and mining exemptions severely limit the LPGCD's ability to preserve and protect groundwater resources. The County should work closely with the LPGCD to ensure new development is managed to minimize negative impacts on existing well owners and future water supplies.

Municipal Utility Districts (MUD's) are a common tool used by developers to provide services in unincorporated areas. MUD's have some taxing authority that can be used to pay for water and wastewater infrastructure. There is some benefit to a MUD because a centralized sewer system is more effective than septic systems on individual lots. If Bastrop County pursues conservation subdivision regulations, MUD's may be a tool to help implement that because they can provide central sewer and water on the smaller lots that cannot support wells and septic systems. MUD's are somewhat controversial; however, the County and cities should work closely with existing and proposed MUD's to ensure they provide adequate service to residents and necessary environmental controls to minimize their impact.

**Strengthen On-site Sewage System Regulations**

The Texas Commission of Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and the Commissioners Court have promulgated rules to ensure the health and safety of citizens using on-site sewage systems. Unfortunately, some of the older systems have failed and have identified problems that need to be addressed. As the county's population has increased, there are also interests in developing smaller lots and for special subdivision techniques to be incorporated in development projects.

Since the quality of the ground water can be impacted by these sewage systems, it is important to strengthen the County Order to address these issues.

## **Transportation Enhancements**

Over 50% of Bastrop County's workforce commutes to Travis County every day to work. Residents in rural areas are often dependent on friends and family for rides into town, or are literally trapped in their homes because of a lack of transportation. These issues are tied to a wide range of transportation enhancements that citizens desire for Bastrop County. These include roadways and safety improvements, road maintenance, and transit service improvements, particularly in unincorporated areas. The County should pursue the following actions to address transportation concerns:

- Roadways and safety improvements
- Road pavement and maintenance
- Transit services
- Regional transportation system (CAMPO or Rural Mobility Authority)

A brief discussion of the recommendations is provided below.

### **Roadway and Safety Improvements**

Road safety is one of the basic responsibilities of county government. Residents voiced concerns at all meetings about the need for wider and better maintained roads and improved intersections in their communities in order to improve safety throughout Bastrop County. It should be a priority to address those areas that are most in need of these improvements.

It is important to identify and develop a county-wide roadway system that would connect to street and highway plans of individual cities and adjacent counties. This roadway network can identify different types of roads with different rights of ways, pavement widths, and construction requirements based on anticipated traffic loads.

Public safety officials and citizens can also work to identify locations in the County that need to be improved. These may be intersections or sections of roads where accidents are common. The County Sheriff and/or Texas Department of Public Safety should have accident reports that will show where these accidents are happening. Once these sites have been identified, a plan can be developed to address the needs.

Stricter enforcement of traffic laws have been a high priority of the Sheriff office. Different locations were identified for stepped up enforcement to promote awareness among drivers of the hazards at these locations. This can be a relatively quick fix for some areas and impress on motorists the seriousness of these safety concerns. Over time, it will help educate motorists, reduce potential risks, save lives, and reduce injuries.

Signage and lighting can also help to reduce risks. Traffic lights could be added at intersections to more clearly delineate their location. Signs can be installed to warn drivers when approaching curves or where other hazards exist. While traffic lights and signs can become fairly expensive, it is cost effective when rated against the cost of accidents and response. By prioritizing roadways and intersection improvement, the expense can be addressed over time.

There is also a need for redesigning sections of road and/or intersections to make them safer. This would be a long term effort with a significant investment. Developing a prioritized list of roadway improvements will allow the County to set a long term Capital Improvement Program's budget and begin implementing needed improvements. These improvements may require a bond program to serve the growing population.

### **Road Maintenance and Expansion**

A number of roads still need to be paved. The development of a "County Roadway Plan" would enable the County to evaluate roads to determine the widths and types of roadway construction needed. Poorly maintained roads are also a safety hazard as well as an impediment to economic development. New businesses want excellent road access and may hesitate to locate where adequate mobility does not exist. A priority process similar to the one discussed for major roadways and intersection improvements could be followed. All major maintenance and road widening/expansion should be coordinated with other improvements to reduce costs and repetition of work.

Because many roads are in the jurisdiction of TxDOT, any desired highway improvements would be coordinated with them. If the County has a prioritized list of needed improvements along with funding identified, it is more likely to receive support from TxDOT on needed projects that will require state cooperation.

### **Transit Service Improvements**

Bastrop County is served by Capital Area Rural Transit Service (CARTS) which provides beneficial but limited service. Many residents, particularly the elderly and disabled, often have no ability to get to services offered in cities. Increasing traffic and gas prices make commuting more challenging for those with vehicles and residents are looking for alternatives for their daily drive to work. These are significant challenges facing county citizens, and the County should be creative to find appropriate solutions. Some recommendations include:

- Encourage car/van pooling
- Expand county transit services
- Develop commuter rail service

#### *Encourage Car/Van Pooling*

With so many Bastrop residents commuting to Travis County every day, there is a significant opportunity to establish car and van pools to reduce the number of cars on the road. Locations could be identified in Bastrop County to allow residents to meet at a common location and share rides into town. The County can encourage this by developing information campaigns in conjunction with local papers, describing the potential savings. The County could identify locations in the Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville area where residents could meet to set up car and van pools. Local businesses may be willing to provide coffee and donuts. at the locations to help encourage people to participate. This would be a low cost, fairly easy program for the County to address traffic issues. Development of car and van pools often happened without government involvement. Businesses in other cities can organized the pools easier from within their organizations but the County can support the process. The overall goal is to reduce the

number of single occupant vehicles driving on US 290 and SH 71 every morning and evening. There is a Park and Ride facility in Manor and the County could help promote it for some residents to save on driving to Austin.

There are already volunteer driver programs across the County providing rides to residents who do not have access to a car. The American Cancer Society has a volunteer system that provides transportation for those in need of cancer treatment and this could be a model for other county systems. A new non-profit, Faith in Action, is also being created to provide volunteer assistance, and they are already providing drivers to those in need. The County could be involved in this effort by helping to get more organizations involved and serve as a clearinghouse for those needing assistance.

#### *Expand County Transit Services*

A new county-wide transit system would be difficult and expensive to establish resulting in serving a limited population. Instead, the County would be better served through expanding and improving CARTS. The County should actively work with the CARTS Board and CAPCOG to identify ways to improve service, provide additional funding, and serve the needs of county residents. It would be critical to identify routes that would maximize the connectivity of the County and provide services to those most in need. This would likely include areas like McDade, Cedar Creek, Stony Point, etc. areas where residents have limited access to amenities. An expanded system would also be able to provide reliable service for residents needing transportation between their homes and doctor appointments, work, etc.

#### *Develop Commuter Rail Service*

Capital Metro is currently planning commuter rail service to connect Leander to downtown Austin. There are also plans underway to expand this system into other areas. While Bastrop County is not part of Capital Metro service area, there is an opportunity to establish a rail connection between Elgin and Austin. This connection could reduce the traffic flows on US 290. Commuter rail would encourage new development at stations, as has been seen in Dallas suburbs around DART stations. Mixed use and higher density development around rail stations could help reduce development in other parts of the County. In addition, these developments support additional retail and business opportunities which bring new tax revenues to the cities and county as well as encourage tourism by increasing access from the Austin area.

The City of Elgin has already initiated discussions with Capital Metro and others to explore planning and implementation of rail service to the northern part of the county. This effort should be fully supported by the County.

#### **Regional Transportation System (CAMPO or a Rural Mobility Authority)**

Bastrop County is part of the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area, Envision Austin, and is integrally connected to Travis County. At this time, it is not part of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) which directs federal transportation planning and construction funds. Since a strong connection already exists between Bastrop County and MPO counties, it is logical for Bastrop County to join the

## Opportunity Bastrop County

MPO and receive some of its benefits. This would allow the County to participate in long range transportation planning, to access additional road construction funds, and to have greater participation in decision making. The County is already active in many activities of the Capital Area Planning Council of Governments (CAPCOG). This should continue to ensure that the needs of Bastrop County are incorporated into the larger regional planning efforts.

If CAMPO is not amenable to include Bastrop County, the County could consider forming a Regional Mobility Authority (RMA), either alone, or in cooperation with other counties. A RMA would open up many of the same benefits that membership in CAMPO would bring. Bastrop County could be the lead rather than working with representatives from Travis, Williamson, and Hays Counties as well as other major cities which are much larger and could have more influence on the CAMPO Board. However, it is recommended that the County pursue membership in CAMPO since it would be more effective given the existing connections and coordination with the counties in CAMPO.



### **Economic Development and Educational Opportunities**

These two issues really go hand in hand because providing a well-trained workforce is one of the biggest attractions for new businesses. All of the recommendations in this Plan will positively impact quality of life and make Bastrop County more attractive to prospective businesses. The key will be for the County to coordinate efforts among the three cities to reduce competition among them for businesses, and to encourage the creation of higher education opportunities in the County. Rather than taking the lead on economic development, the County should support the efforts of the cities which are very active in this area. Development in any one city will positively impact the County as a whole. To do this, the County should:

- Establish a strong relationship with Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville Economic Development groups
- Tourism Development
- Encourage Higher Learning Opportunities in Bastrop County

### **Establish a Strong Relationship with Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville Economic Development groups**

Bastrop County does not need to take the lead in economic development activities since there are strong programs in each of the cities. The County already cooperates with the cities on their economic development activities and should continue to do so. The County should serve to remind the cities that economic development is most successful when a regional approach is taken. If a new business locates in Elgin, Bastrop and Smithville will see some benefits from this. It may not be direct tax or utility increases; however, employees of that business may choose to live and shop in the other communities. In addition, all residents of Bastrop County will benefit from the increased tax dollars going to fund County services.

Another opportunity for the County is to establish common and well-thought out incentive policies for new businesses. This will ensure a consistent approach to incentives which reduces the opportunity for someone to claim unfairness in the process. In addition, an established policy will reduce the possibility of ill-informed decisions that might leave the County and cities with bad incentive investments. Once the policy is established with all economic development organizations it can be incorporated into their marketing plans and materials.

The incentive policy also provides an opportunity for the County and cities to implement some of the recommendations in this Plan. Developers that meet requirements identified in this plan may be eligible for incentives, while those that choose not to will not receive them. These could include:

- Including rainwater collection systems in new buildings
- Reducing impervious cover (parking lots, etc.)
- Preservation of streamside buffers or other habitat
- Road and intersection improvements
- Partnership with area schools for training and internships

The goal is to develop a policy that will provide benefits to the County and cities as well as to the prospective business. This can minimize potential negatives from development and improve the quality of life for all residents.

### **Tourism Development**

Bastrop County is one of the most historic areas of Texas, which combined with the Colorado River, provide a strong basis for tourism development. Many participants identified the Colorado River as an underutilized resource for economic development in Bastrop County. These assets helped attract the new Hyatt Lost Pines Resort, which is a tremendous benefit to the County as a whole. The recommendations in this plan, particularly those relating to the preservation of agricultural lands, streamside preservation, and the development of river access points will help to build the tourism industry in the County. Agricultural tourism is also growing in popularity, people flock to the Fredericksburg area to tour the vineyards in that area. Blanco is working to develop a lavender industry to attract tourists. Bastrop County has an opportunity to work with local producers to establish agricultural tourism opportunities. With the river, agriculture and the history of Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville, Bastrop County is a true destination that can utilize tourism as a significant economic development tool. The benefit of tourism is that visitors do not typically require significant public investments, rather they come, spend their money, and go back home. This leaves the dollars in local pockets where it most benefits the entire community.

### **Encourage Higher Learning Opportunities in Bastrop County**

Employers demand a well-trained workforce before locating into a community. They want to know that there is a pool of available employees for their businesses before making an investment. Having a higher education facility in Bastrop County will significantly increase the attractiveness of the County for new business. In addition, existing businesses will benefit greatly because of the potential for workforce training with the educational facility.

Bastrop County is in the Austin Community College district, which is established by the State of Texas. Currently, Bastrop County residents do not pay the property tax for ACC and do not receive the benefits of local district services. ACC does have an established relationship with the school districts; however, there is not a local campus. It may be worth pursuing a vote to join ACC because of the consistent support for higher learning throughout the public input process. There has already been some discussion with ACC as to where a facility may be best located, potential costs, etc. so this conversation should be pursued. It will be important to have a solid plan in place before approaching voters so that they fully understand the costs and benefits and can make an informed decision on joining ACC.

Several state universities have also begun to expand to new sites throughout the state. Texas State has located a campus in Round Rock that co-locates ACC and Temple Junior College. Texas Tech has established a campus in Fredericksburg and other smaller cities. Blinn College has several campuses, including one in Schulenburg. There may be an opportunity for the County to work with the cities to encourage the location of a satellite

campus of a major college in Bastrop County. The City of Bastrop would likely be the focus of attention due to its central location; however, Elgin or Smithville may be attractive due to land and development costs. The County should explore this possibility in partnership with the cities.

Another opportunity may be the development of a Technical School in Bastrop County. The County could support this effort by providing financial assistance for a Tech School to locate in the County. This may include helping to fund a building , equipment, or other assistance. Local school districts can be a tremendous asset in this effort. They already work with some local businesses to offer training and internship opportunities, and these should be expanded. They may be able to work together to provide additional technical training or services to support a technical school in Bastrop County. The County could also coordinate with the cities to develop an incentive package that would entice a school to come. Local businesses could participate and benefit from workforce training opportunities. The County should serve as the facilitator for this process and build the coalition that will attract a school.

## **Public Safety**

Of all the issues discussed in this plan, public safety is the most fundamental to the role of County government. Residents deserve to be safe and secure in their homes, knowing that emergency services are available when needed. This is also where the County spends most of its money, so it is critical to ensure the best service is provided for the money. Through its Emergency Management Center, the County already provides excellent service and resources for public safety, including a recent purchase of new brush trucks for every volunteer fire department in the County. Bastrop County has also taken a leadership role in establishing Emergency Services Districts which provide additional resources for public safety. These efforts should be commended. The following recommendations will also help to address public safety concerns in the County:

- Review crime and accident reports and adjust patrols if necessary
- Continue support of Volunteer Fire Departments and Emergency Service Districts
- Improve Emergency Medical Services

## **Review Crime and Accident Reports**

There are a limited number of deputies on patrol at any given time, and they cannot be everywhere at once. The Sheriff's Department regularly reviews incident reports to identify patterns that may require additional attention from deputies on patrol. A priority for the Sheriff has been to keep the deputies actively patrolling their districts and building relationships with citizens. This allows greater trust and communication from citizens.

One struggle has been to fill open positions for deputies. The County has provided adequate funding for deputies and salaries; however, there has been a challenge to replace deputies who have left or fill new positions. There is an on-going effort to fill vacancies and maintain the number of staff needed to ensure public safety.

Neighborhood watch has been shown to reduce crime where there are programs. The County partners with neighborhood groups to get programs up and running and should continue this effort. An option may be to provide radios to these groups to give better contact with deputies. This program could serve as an extension for the Citizens on Patrol (COP) program that is already established. This provides additional 'eyes on the street' and trained volunteers to assist the Sheriff department in its duties.

## **Continue Support of Volunteer Fire Departments and Emergency Service Districts**

As mentioned, the County has shown strong support for the Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD's) and in the creation of Emergency Service Districts (ESD's). This support should continue in the future. ESD's provide a funding mechanism that may increase the paid staff in the County. There are few paid firefighters in Bastrop County. As the population grows, it will be more important to increase the availability of professional firefighters to respond to growing needs. ESD's may provide the funding needed for this. Many VFD's struggle with financing and the County support is invaluable. An indirect support for VFD's is the County's role in economic development. If residents are working in Bastrop County, they may be more willing to be volunteer firefighters because they are around rather than having to be in Austin for work.

The County should work with the unincorporated communities not already in an Emergency Service District and help them determine if establishing one would be appropriate. An ESD will provide a stable financing method for fire and EMS services in that area. The County should highlight the benefits of an ESD in improved service and response times to increase support for their creation throughout Bastrop County.

**Improve Emergency Medical Services**

The County and the three cities currently have a contract with Metro-Care to provide emergency medical services. They are also reviewing ways to improve these services, especially in the area of response time. With increased population and more traffic on the roads, it is important that quality emergency medical services be provided. While response times may be different in the County than in the cities, the rural residents need to be able to rely on a reasonable response times for these important services.

### **Services for Low Income, Elderly, and Mobility Impaired Residents**

The County provides services for those residents least able to support themselves. The needs of these residents may get lost as Bastrop County struggles to deal with the rapid growth it faces. Many of the recommendations in this plan will improve services for low income citizens, especially the focus on parks, transit and economic development. Ideally, all residents should have access to recreational facilities, transit services to travel to work, appointments, etc., and jobs in proximity to their homes. One area not discussed is health care. The County has some level of responsibility for health care for residents and should support programs that provide the highest quality care.

- Provide support to community clinics in Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville
- Explore the potential to establish mobile health clinics to serve rural areas

### **Provide Support to Community Clinics in Bastrop and Smithville and Explore Potential to Open a Clinic in Elgin**

The most cost-effective way to provide health care is preventative medicine. This means providing services before people have to go to the emergency room. Community Clinics provide minor emergency care and preventative care that reduces emergency room visits by catching problems early, or allowing those with non-critical needs (such as flu, etc.) to receive care there rather than the hospital. The County should continue to support these clinics as much as possible. If feasible, the County could provide funding that would expand the hours of the clinics on the weekends or later in the evenings, again to reduce emergency room visits. Also, many residents who work outside the County may not be able to visit a doctor on a weekday, so having evening and weekend hours may provide them access to preventative care. Elgin currently does not have a clinic, which means residents there are forced to travel to Bastrop or Austin for care. It would be a valuable service for the County to support the development of a clinic in Elgin to serve that area of the County.

A longer term possibility may be the creation of a Health Services District, with taxing authority to provide additional resources for medical services. This would be a challenging undertaking because of the cost; however, it may become necessary down the line. This is something the County could pursue in the future.

### **Explore the Potential for Mobile Health Clinics**

As discussed previously, most county residents do not live in cities and may not have access to community clinics. They still need preventative health care. The County should explore the possibility of establishing mobile health clinics that will go to the rural communities and provide basic, preventative care. This could include health screenings, physicals, and regular check ups. Sick residents could also receive basic care, such as antibiotics, etc. thus saving a trip to the emergency room. The County should work with existing emergency medical service providers to determine if they are willing to participate in this type of project.

County leadership should research other areas where mobile health clinics have been created to determine an estimate of costs and necessary resources. This will allow the County to determine a preliminary budget and determine how the service would be paid

for. Then the County could work with a service provider (MetroCare, area hospitals, Lincoln Clinic, and other entities) to establish the service, schedule the visits, etc. The County could also help to promote this service and encourage residents to participate. Fees could be charged on a sliding scale to help recoup some of the cost. While there may be a significant cost in establishing the program, some of that cost will be offset by reduced costs paid to area hospitals for unnecessary emergency room visits.

Tele-medicine is another opportunity that the County could support for both the mobile clinics and the Community Clinics located in each of the cities. The County may be able to obtain financial assistance for needed equipment to connect these facilities to the hospitals in Smithville and Bastrop and, potentially, Austin-area hospitals. This would increase the services being provided because the doctors at the clinics would have access to a broader range of expertise and resources than would be available locally. This may help reduce the number of patients who have to travel to visit an area hospital, improve the quality of care, and reduce overall costs for the County.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges facing Bastrop County seem huge at first glance. But the opportunities are just as huge. The massive growth the county is experiencing brings people with new ideas and fresh energy to meet growing problems and to grab new opportunities. In addition, “old timers” bring wisdom and history to honor and retain the rural character.

This plan is the paper version of local challenges and potential solutions. By “taking the pulse” of residents around the county and getting input on the direction for the County, a solid action plan has been created. It identifies specific actions County leaders must pursue to responsibly serve everyone. The Commissioners Court can help this process move forward by making itself more accessible to County residents. This includes holding meetings in the evenings and in locations other than the City of Bastrop. However, all the responsibility cannot rest on government alone.

To be successful, residents must participate in the process. They must be in contact with Commissioners either on the phone, at the office, or at Commissioner Court meetings, to help make sure priorities are understood and addressed. Citizens must step up and be part of Volunteer Fire Departments, neighborhood watch groups, Community Centers, churches, schools and other community groups. They must participate in citizen groups around the county to spread the word about this plan and start working on the actions identified in the plan.

Residents need to understand the true costs of the services the County provides and the benefits gained, when asked to pay higher taxes. Improved services and infrastructure must be paid for; however, improved services will result in increased economic development and bring new revenues to help support them. Keeping farm and ranch lands and wildlife habitat intact is cheaper for the County than having more subdivisions, and is the key to maintaining the rural character that is so important to current residents.

This plan provides a guide to the future of Bastrop County. Residents and leaders must embrace the initiatives identified in the plan and work to make them successful. If the plan is implemented, current and future residents will continue to enjoy the rural character and quality of life that makes Bastrop County the unique place it is. An Implementation Guide with specific objectives and action is provided in the following section.



## Implementation

The real success in planning is not based on the quality of the plan, rather it is in the implementation of the plan recommendations. If a plan sits on a shelf gathering dust, it does no good to anyone. This plan in particular, because of the significant public input, should not be allowed to go unimplemented. It will require the involvement of concerned citizens, County leadership, cities, school districts, and other organizations to be successful; however, the plan is very doable if the community works together.

Members of the Steering Committee have been actively involved in developing this plan and have identified with many of its recommendations. These individuals can serve as a resource for implementation, by identifying additional individuals and resources to bring to the table. The Commissioners Court should work with the Steering Committee to put together task forces to address the many projects identified in this plan. These task forces should be representative of different constituencies from across the County that will be affected by various projects in the plan. This would include developers, farmers, ranchers, business owners, City planners, mayors, and others. Each project will have its own group of stakeholders who can work together to implement the plan. The Steering Committee can serve as a clearinghouse to monitor activity and keep the Commissioners Court informed of activities.

People are more likely to get involved with clearly defined projects that they can see result in some level of success. This plan identifies specific activities that people can rally behind and accomplish without feeling like they will be committed forever. The Commissioners Court should work with the Steering Committee to establish working groups that reflect the County as a whole to ensure on-going public involvement and support for the effort.

One critical concern is the fiscal impact of the plan. Many of the recommendations require a significant investment to implement. Any project should begin with a financial analysis to determine if there is money available for the project, where the money may come from, and what the on-going costs will be of the project. The Commissioners Court will be more supportive of efforts that identify this early in the process because of their responsibility to utilize limited resources to maximum benefit. Task forces will have to ensure they understand the financial implications of their projects and can justify the cost, or find ways to offset the cost to the County for projects.