



September 21, 2021

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12428 Austin, Texas 78711

The Honorable Dan Patrick
Lieutenant Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12068 Austin, Texas 78711

The Honorable Dade Phelan
Speaker of the Texas House
P.O. Box 2910 Austin, TX 78768

Dear Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, and Speaker Phelan,

We write to you in strong support of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department request for funding available to the state of Texas from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). We are particularly excited about their requests for funds to acquire land to expand existing and create new parks, to construct and repair state park facilities, and to help protect private land through the Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program. We hope you will also consider providing \$60 million in funding for local parks.

It took a global calamity that forced the nation to stay indoors to remind us how much we need to be outside. From state parks to hike-and-bike trails, Texans are pouring out of their homes to enjoy places of peace and beauty that they once assumed they were too busy to frequent in their hectic 21st-century lives. Even as many of us return back to some semblance of normalcy, parks remain packed to the brim.

From camping under the stars at Big Bend Ranch to exploring the cypress swamps of Caddo Lake, our parks make life better here in Texas. In them we can build sandcastles at the beach, camp in the mountains, stargaze in dark sky sanctuaries, explore dinosaur footprints or play a ballgame in a local park. Our parks protect the clean water we depend on and provide a home for some of Texas' most wondrous wildlife, like the black bear and the leatherback sea turtle.

Demand for our parks is only increasing as Texas grows, and Texans seek refuge in the great outdoors, but unfortunately investments in our parks and open spaces aren't keeping pace with needs. It can be difficult to book a campsite without planning ahead months in advance. Simply put, demand for parks vastly outweighs the supply. Our parks are too often crowded, with

visitors sometimes facing long lines to enter or even being turned away. During a time of national stress such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or just in everyday life, lack of access to parks limits our ability to take a healthy walk, clear our heads or simply enjoy the serenity of a forest, marsh or lake. Meanwhile, every hour on average, 10 acres of open space are lost to development.¹

Across the state, Texans want more parks. In 2019, Texans flocked to the polls to support Proposition 5, with 88% of voters agreeing that Texas' parks needed more funds.² On September 14th, Texas 2036 released a poll revealing that 68% of Texans bipartisanly support allocating \$1 billion of ARPA funds for parkland acquisition.³

The Treasury Department has expressly recognized that “there are multiple ways that investments in improving outdoor spaces could qualify as eligible uses” of ARPA funds.⁴ At least seven states have used some of their ARPA funds for parks and conservation, including Florida, which appropriated \$300 million to acquire land to protect wildlife.⁵

The Legislature took a historic step in guaranteeing stable funding for our parks system through Proposition 5. However, the vast majority of the funds are used for operations and maintenance. In the current biennium, only \$7 million was appropriated for land acquisition—simply not enough for our parks to keep pace with state growth.

This disparity should come as no surprise. Over 20 years ago, Texas Tech University published *Texas Parks and Wildlife for the 21st Century*.⁶ Commissioned by the TPWD, this seminal report estimated Texas would need to add 1.4 million additional acres of parkland by 2030 in order to keep up with population growth. While we've made some progress since then, including the acquisition of Palo Pinto Mountains State Park and Powderhorn Ranch, the state still needs to add more than one million acres of parks to ensure that every Texan has access to the great outdoors. Achieving such a goal could require an investment greater than \$3 billion, based on current prices for rural land. The federal Great American Outdoors Act, private philanthropy and other sources will help us, but the state of Texas must be an active partner.

¹ Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute. “Status Update and Trends of Texas Working Lands,” https://txlandtrends.org/media/qzpbz2j/texas-land-trends_status-update-and-trends-of-tx-working-lands.pdf

² [https://ballotpedia.org/Texas_Proposition_5_Sales_Tax_on_Sporting_Goods_Dedicated_to_Parks_Wildlife_and_Historical_Agencies_Amendment_\(2019\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Texas_Proposition_5_Sales_Tax_on_Sporting_Goods_Dedicated_to_Parks_Wildlife_and_Historical_Agencies_Amendment_(2019)).

³ Texas 2036. “Texas Voter Poll,” https://3hr27o3s9nj8m84dw4489i31-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Texas-Voter-Poll-Sept_2021.pdf

⁴ “Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/SLFRPFAQ.pdf>

⁵ “ARPA Allocations by State.” National Conference of State Legislatures <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiODMxYjI1NGMtZWQ0Ny00YzNiLTkxNjQtMTBNDZjYTkzNzhhlwi dCI6IjM4MmZiOGIwLTRkYzMtNDEwNy04MGJkLTM1OTViMjQzMmZhZSIsImMiOjZ9&pageName=ReportSection>

⁶ Texas Tech University. “Texas Parks and Wildlife for the 21st Century,” https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/nonpwdpubs/media/tpwd_21st_century.pdf.

Exposure to nature is just what the doctor ordered during the pandemic. It improves social cohesion, enhances mental wellness, and improves physical health for all people. Children, especially, benefit from an investment in parks. Studies continue to demonstrate that kids with the opportunity to live and learn outdoors are happier, healthier, and perform better cognitively.

Beyond the sense of place and commitment to conservation which develop from spending time immersed in nature, the value of the habitat these lands provide for the "wild things" that call them home also requires consideration. Biodiversity acts as a clear indicator of environmental health and provides "aesthetic, ecological, education, cultural, recreational, economic, and scientific value." Whether citizen scientists or lifelong researchers, studies and data related to these places helps inform policy makers and the general public.

In addition, the Local Parks Grants Program, which provides matching grants to local governments to build playgrounds, ball fields, and other parks and recreation facilities, and the Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program, which provides grants to private landowners to preserve rural lands from development, are oversubscribed and badly in need of additional funds.

TPWD has requested almost \$240 million of ARPA funds for acquisition, construction and repair of state parks facilities and the Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program as part of a larger, \$410 million request. Such an appropriation would be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to continue to build a world class parks system for Texas. We also recommend supporting our local parks with a \$60 million appropriation.

With our state parks celebrating their centennial in 2023, let's start preparing for their next 100 years with a bold investment in our future. A \$300 million appropriation for state and local parks, supplemented with funding from private philanthropy, the federal government, and elsewhere is a great initial investment on protecting our wild places and making sure all Texans have access to the great outdoors. The campers, hikers, hunters, anglers, and wildlife of Texas will appreciate you.

Sincerely,

Seth Billingsley
Conservation Associate, Environment Texas

Bob Stokes
President, Galveston Bay Foundation

Beth Whitehead
President and CEO, Houston Parks Board

Jeff Achée
Legislative Chair, Texas Recreation and Parks Society (TRAPS)

Joe Betar
Executive Director, Houston Safari Club

Daniel Eck
Chief Executive Officer, Hill Country Conservancy

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