

williamson county, texas  
blackland heritage county park



baker-aicklen associates + luck design team

WILLIAMSON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT

COUNTY JUDGE

Judge Dan A. Gattis

COUNTY COMMISSIONER - PRECINCT 1

Commissioner Lisa Birkman

COUNTY COMMISSIONER - PRECINCT 2

Commissioner Cynthia Long

COUNTY COMMISSIONER - PRECINCT 3

Commissioner Valerie Covey

COUNTY COMMISSIONER - PRECINCT 4

Commissioner Ron Morrison

COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES

WILLIAMSON COUNTY PARKS DIRECTOR

Randy Bell, Interim Director of Parks & Recreation

Gary Boyd, Environmental Project Manager

Terry Roberts Parks Superintendant

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DESIGN TEAM

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SPECIAL RECOGNITION:

Jim Rodgers was the first Parks Director appointed to serve the citizens of Williamson County. Through his unique and collaborative ways, Mr. Rodgers helped set a solid foundation for the park system that we enjoy today. The Blackland Heritage County Park is one of several properties that Mr. Rodgers helped secure for park development. In all decisions, Mr. Rodgers always considered the resource, and tried to find creative and fun ways to entice kids and their families to enjoy the great outdoors. This plan reflects those values, and will help create a great nature based park for future Williamson County residents to enjoy. Mr. Rodgers always made work fun, even if it meant pre-testing a new fishing hole for an upcoming event. Without his vision and leadership many of the parks and trails we enjoy in Williamson County would not exist.

Thank you Jim!



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Since 2000, when Williamson County passed its first park's bond, the county began a process of identifying and purchasing large areas for parks and trails connecting the various cities within the county and preserves them for future generations to enjoy. For the last ten years Williamson County has invested an impressive amount of resources in strategically acquiring and maintaining large areas for parkland which is quickly becoming iconic with the rich heritage of Williamson County. Since this process began the county has since developed four of its primary regional parks and implemented a large scale regional trail development partnership with the communities embracing Brushy Creek. The County, with funding partners such as the Williamson County YMCA and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, has developed award-winning facilities at the Williamson County Regional Park, Berry Springs Park & Preserve, Twin Lakes Park, and Champions Park and adopted a master plan for River Ranch County Park in the western portion of Williamson County. This visionary process is still ongoing today.

In 2008, Williamson County purchased 348 acres from the Byers family within the eastern portion of the county along State Highway 29 and fronting the San Gabriel River along the south side. As identified in the county-wide Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan of 2008, this park is intended for use as a regional nature-based park to serve the stakeholders in eastern

Williamson County. The Blackland Heritage County Park completes the county's goal of providing regional scale, nature based parks equitably distributed within the four geographic quadrants of Williamson County. This master plan celebrates the significance of the blackland prairie and the natural and historic roles it has played in the lives of those who settled the eastern portion of Williamson County and the lives of those that are the future of Williamson County.

The purpose of this master plan is to express the shared vision that has emerged through a four month process of learning, organizing and consensus-building, and to suggest direction to guide future planning and stewardship activities. This master plan gives a new significance to Blackland Heritage Park's role in Williamson County's future. Purposely, the document does not specify how to achieve this vision. Design details and exact locations for trails, amenities, etc. are likewise not included. Those features should be determined in stages over the next several years. Instead, this master plan describes the major considerations for future park development and suggests how to approach them. It provides both the inspiration and broad ideas that will guide any future park improvements. The vision for Blackland Heritage Park and processes to achieve the long-term potential for the park are described herein.

This plan is presented in five parts. The first, History and Vision, establishes a

historical context and vision for the park's future. The second, Understanding the Site, explores and defines the physical conditions related to developmental capacity of this site to function in its intended use. The third, Planning and Design, addresses the process of assessing the parks programmatic goals as defined by key stakeholder input and participation. The fourth, The Master Plan, seeks to present the overall recommendations and guiding principles for the future development of the park and the last section, What's Next, addresses the associated cost of developing the park and addresses the recommended subsequent steps in which to begin implementing the development of the park.





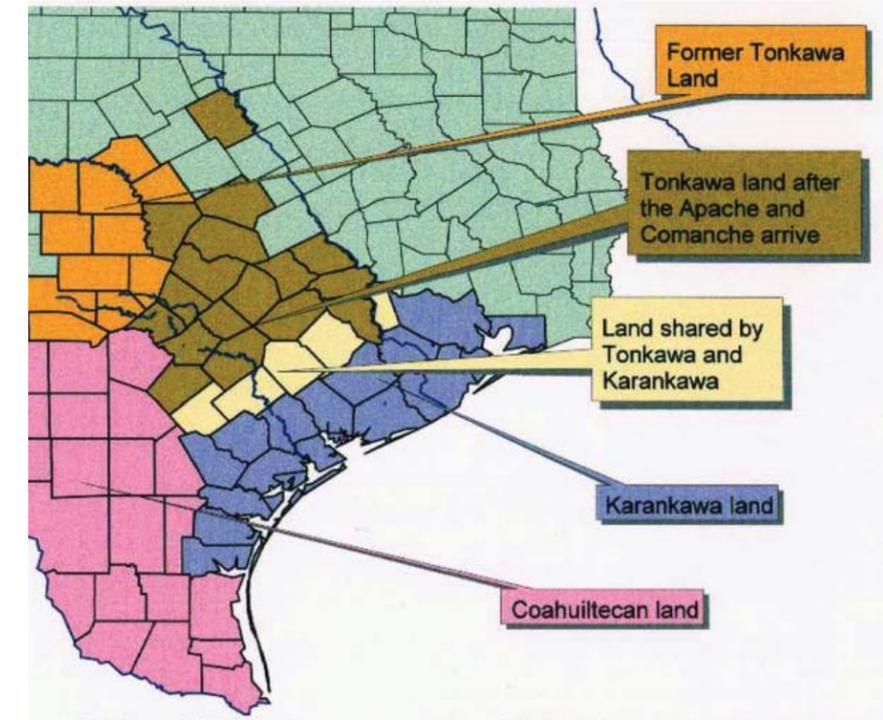
The citizens of Williamson County, Texas, received a tremendous opportunity when the Byers property was purchased as 398 acres of new county parkland. Subsequently achieving the county's goal of acquiring and protecting parkland equally distributed around the county. This parkland is situated east along highway 29 and fronts one of central Texas' greatest resources, the San Gabriel River. When charged by the County Commissioners Court to create a 21st century regional park for Williamson County, our design team drew inspiration from both a rich natural history of central Texas and the agrarian heritage of the blackland prairie farmers dating back to the trail drives of yesteryear. Acknowledging the evolution of the site, the Master Plan builds upon those traditions while introducing the idea that untamed nature can dynamically combine with the contemporary context to conceive the Park as a "New Hope".

### THE SITE

The Master Plan for this regional park embraces its natural and historical relationships to the land in which it resides. Williamson County consists generally of two eco-regions of significance in this historic settlement of central Texas. Geologically, a significant fault line called the Balcones Escarpment formed millions of years ago and coincidentally runs north and south along Interstate 35 in central Texas. This created the two distinct eco-regions on either side of the fault line. To the west, the limestone hill country, and to the east, the rich lowland soils of the blackland prairie, each playing key roles in the settlement of the diverse central Texas landscape. The Master Plan celebrates the significance of the blackland prairie and the natural and historic roles it has played in the lives of those who settled the eastern portion of Williamson County and the lives of those that are the future of Williamson County. This 348-acre parcel could be thought of as that sentimental piece of land that many long-time citizens have held sacred in their memories, and that the Master Plan reveres through the site's natural and cultural landscape origins, allowing the Park to become productive again, revealing not only what once was but also what could be.

### TONKAWA

Sketch of Chief Placido. Along with his tribe, they joined forces with the Texas Rangers to scout for Comanches. The Tonkawas held a small territory in central Texas due to the surrounding tribes.



### SOUTHERN BORDER

The San Gabriel River holds the southern border of the blackland park.



THE CONCEPT

Inspired by the novel "The Last Child Left in the Woods" and the effects of nature deficit syndrome in combination with the county's vision of providing open space preservation and nature based regional parks, the opportunity to tell the story of the land was the overwhelmingly dominant theme. The subsequent conceptual platform for the Master Plan of this park became much like a story quilt consisting of four primary patches telling the story of the land. The first patch, referred to as the Last Frontier consists of 21% of the parkland to be renewed into a native blackland prairie, telling the story of land prior to settlement, the expansive native grassland prairie that personifies a genuinely wild Texas territory. The second patch of the master plan devotes 17% of park acreage to represent working farmland for interactive educational opportunities. This area is willfully carved out of the larger and represents the careful crafting of places inspired by the patterns of historic farming communities and cultivated fields, evoking associations with the local cultural landscape that reminds us of where we come from and who we are. The third patch of the master plan devotes 36% of the parkland to be developed in a natural restoration of land incorporating the majority of programmatic parkland activities in a manner representative of the sustainable practices man is realizing are needed to live in harmony with our natural resources. This area is referred as the "New Hope", carefully incorporating sustainable practices with recreational opportunities in a manner that brings interest and adventure back into those who interact with it. Discovery is an important element to the development of interest and individual advancement and is successfully incorporated within this patch. The fourth patch of the master plan devotes 26% of the parkland to be developed as a continuation of the "New Hope", incorporating the opportunity to successfully interact with the river lands or bottomland area. As the most sensitive area within the park and the richest in terms of plants and wildlife, it is of greatest demand by users to be explored and discovered. However, as an active flow zone it requires a unique approach to interacting and discovering within it. Successfully incorporating this strategy will increase the intrigue and reinforce the perception of a unique park experience in all who experience it.

→  
**BACK IN TIME**

A statue recreating a buffalo hunt by the Tonkawa Indians.



→  
**LIFE ON THE FARM**

Children interact with farm equipment, learning about life on the farm.



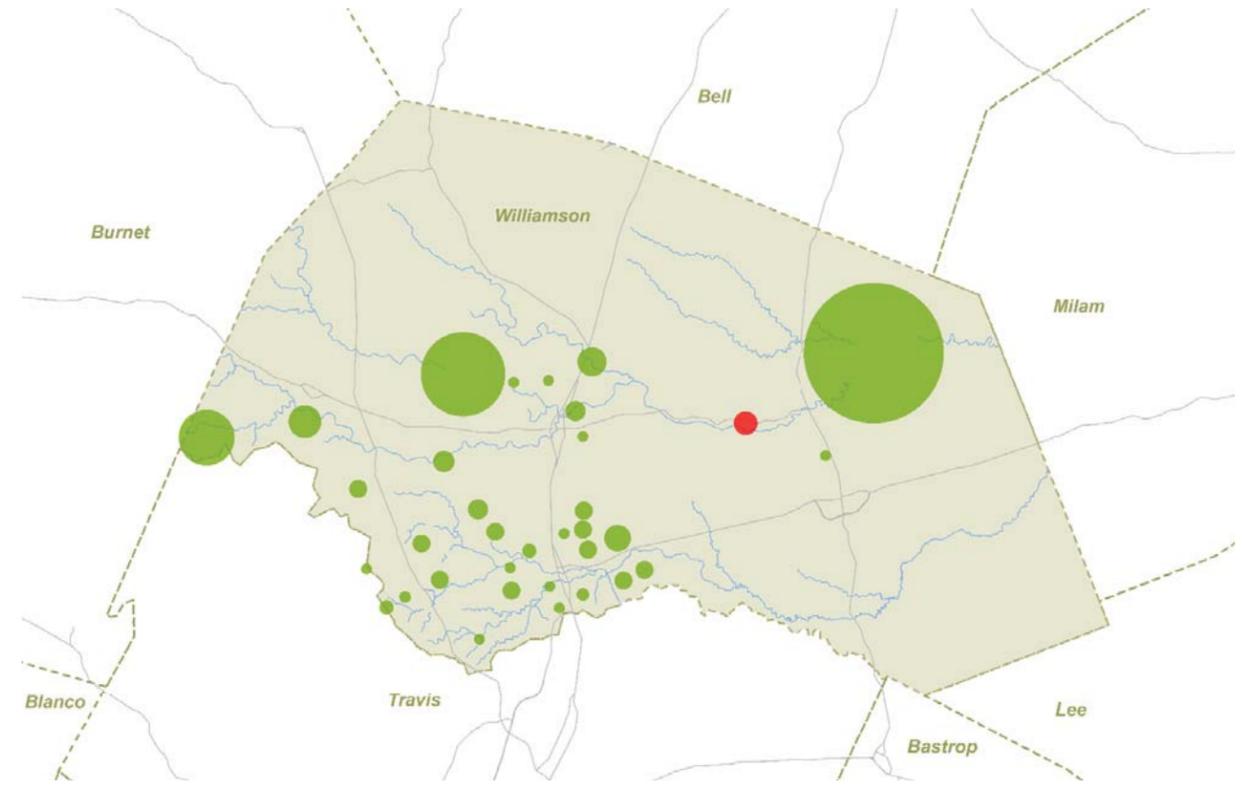
→  
**A NEW HOPE**

Structures blend seamlessly into the landscape to have as little impact as possible.









**EASTERN NEXUS**

The Blackland Heritage County Park is located in the eastern half of Williamson County. The park is situated to bridge the gap between the east and west Williamson County parks.

**SITE CONTEXT**

Located in Jonah, Texas, the Blackland Park is nestled between HW 29 on the north side and the San Gabriel River on the southern edge.

UNDERSTANDING THE SITE + COMMUNITY



NEW AND OLD

A birthday pavilion can fit the character of the site by blending the architectural style of the times with a modern/practical shape.



REGIONAL + CULTURAL ARCHITECTURE

The history of the region is displayed by the prevailing architecture. Much of the surrounding region consists of farmland which has foregone the suburban sprawl only a few miles away. Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) style of architecture is still very present among the landscape within the region as depicted in these photos.

Predominately 1-story structures with a high pitch roof, dressed in wood, metal or stone, materials still heavily used to this day but in different fashions. Roofs extend deep beyond the building to provide cover for the entry spaces from the extreme Texas heat. Light colors are also used in addition to metal roofs which repel heat in the summertime and aid in moderating the temperature of the structure.



INSPIRATION

The region is littered with old farming and ranching structures such as these. Materials, shapes, and colors can be pulled from these structures and incorporated into park buildings.



→  
**FARM EQUIPMENT**

Unused farm equipment like the ones shown here present an opportunity for interpretive opportunities.



**REGIONAL REUSE**

Due to the local presence and condition of period architecture, many of the pieces within the area have the possibility of being reused within the proposed park. While some pieces may not lend themselves to being relocated, others will play a vital role in the vision for the Blackland Park.

↑  
**REGIONAL INSPIRATION**

These silos are a major focal point in the City of Hutto and are a reference to our agricultural heritage.

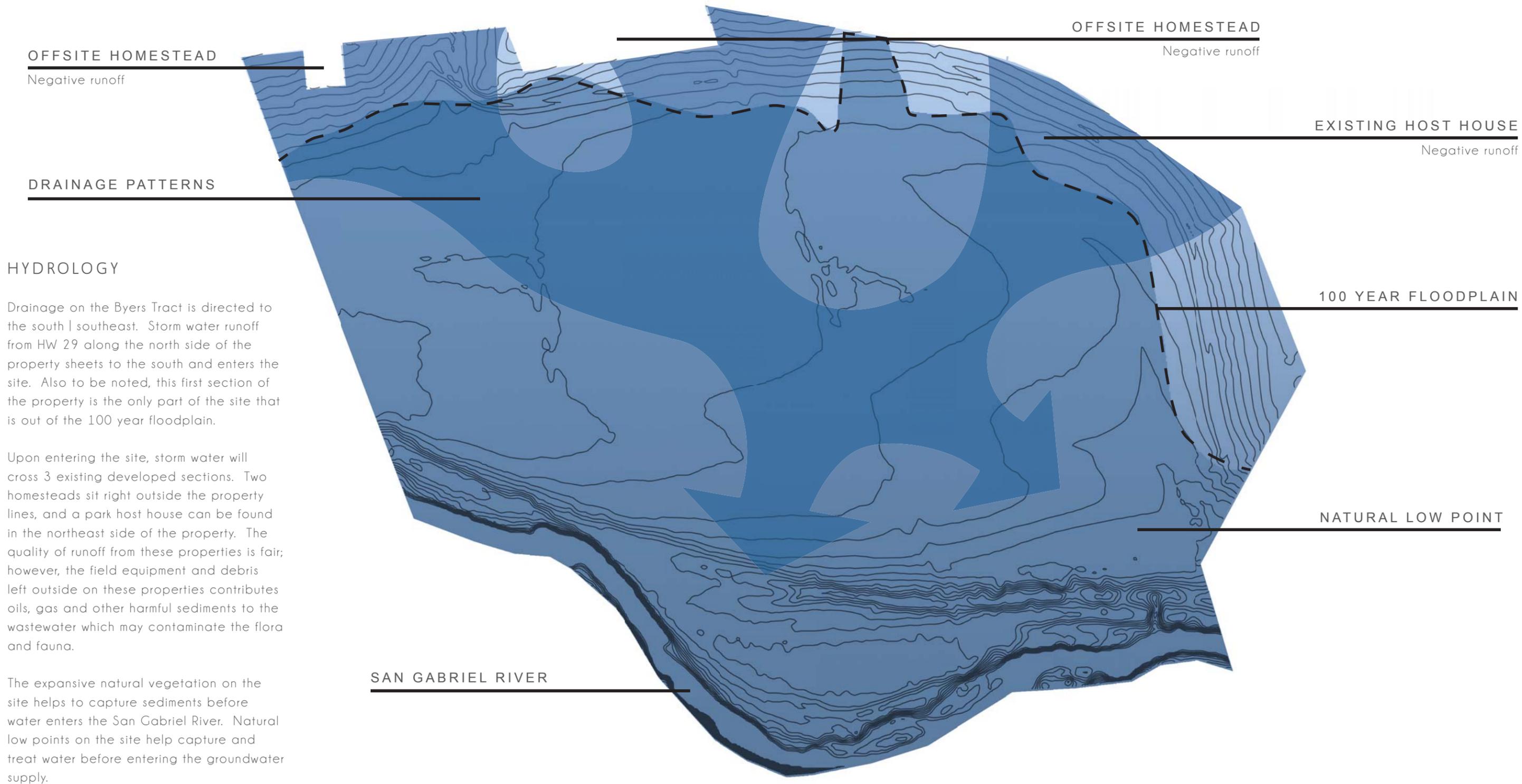




→  
**OVERHEAD ELECTRIC**  
The large regional transmission lines that cut through the center of the site

↓  
**R.O.W.**  
The right-of-way along HW 29 contains water and electric services





**OFFSITE HOMESTEAD**

Negative runoff

**OFFSITE HOMESTEAD**

Negative runoff

**EXISTING HOST HOUSE**

Negative runoff

**DRAINAGE PATTERNS**

**HYDROLOGY**

Drainage on the Byers Tract is directed to the south | southeast. Storm water runoff from HW 29 along the north side of the property sheets to the south and enters the site. Also to be noted, this first section of the property is the only part of the site that is out of the 100 year floodplain.

Upon entering the site, storm water will cross 3 existing developed sections. Two homesteads sit right outside the property lines, and a park host house can be found in the northeast side of the property. The quality of runoff from these properties is fair; however, the field equipment and debris left outside on these properties contributes oils, gas and other harmful sediments to the wastewater which may contaminate the flora and fauna.

The expansive natural vegetation on the site helps to capture sediments before water enters the San Gabriel River. Natural low points on the site help capture and treat water before entering the groundwater supply.

**SAN GABRIEL RIVER**



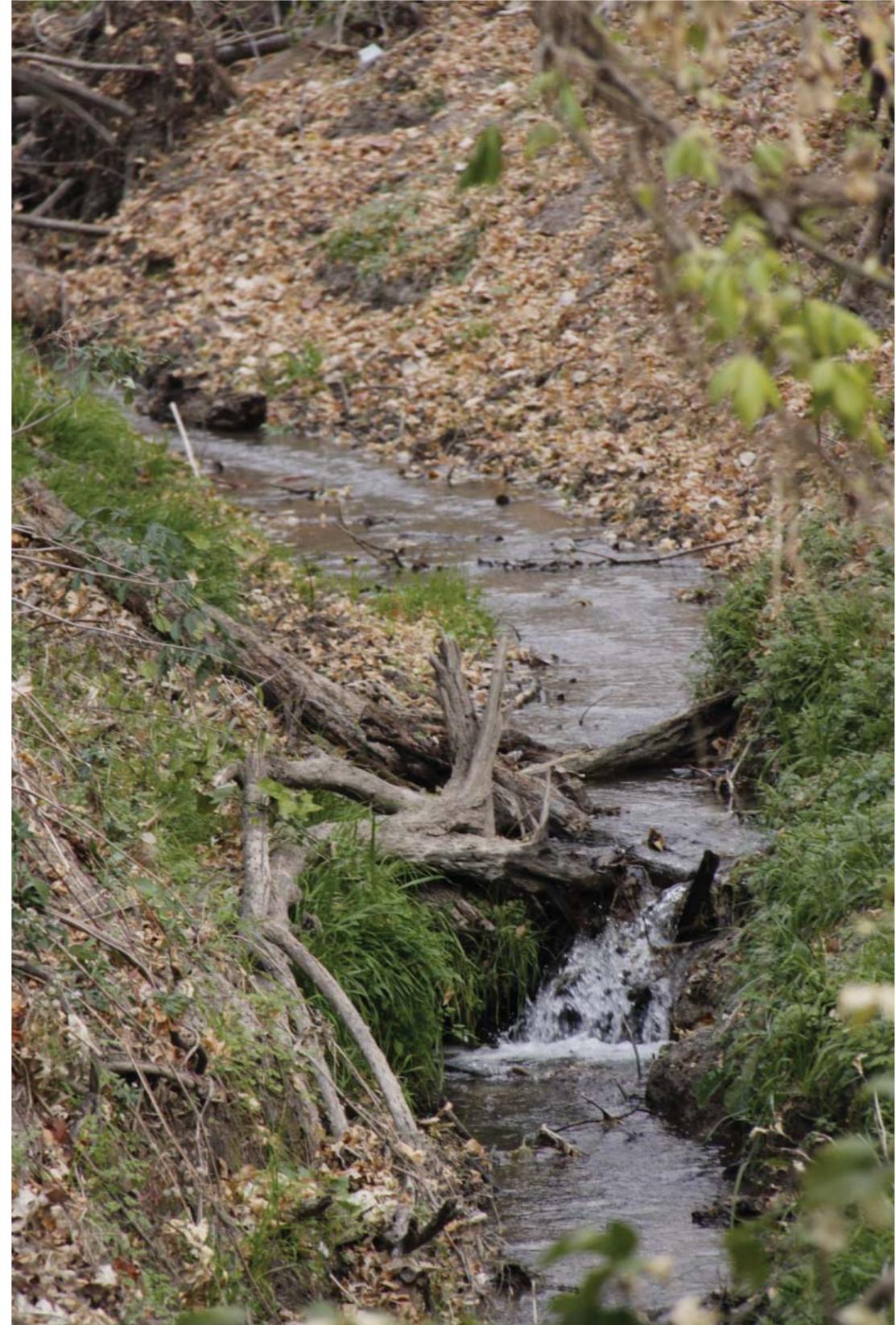
← **NATURAL DEPRESSIONS**  
 Natural low-lying areas on the site collect trash and other debris washed away by areas upland.



← **WATERWAYS**  
 Integrating the San Gabriel River and its greenway into the design of Byers Tract will help connect the park to the regional park system.



← **FLOOD ZONES**  
 Silt and sediment buildup can impede natural drainage ways causing unintentional flooding.



→ **NETWORKS**  
 A series of swales creates a network of streams which feed the San Gabriel River. The natural system collects and treats stormwater runoff.

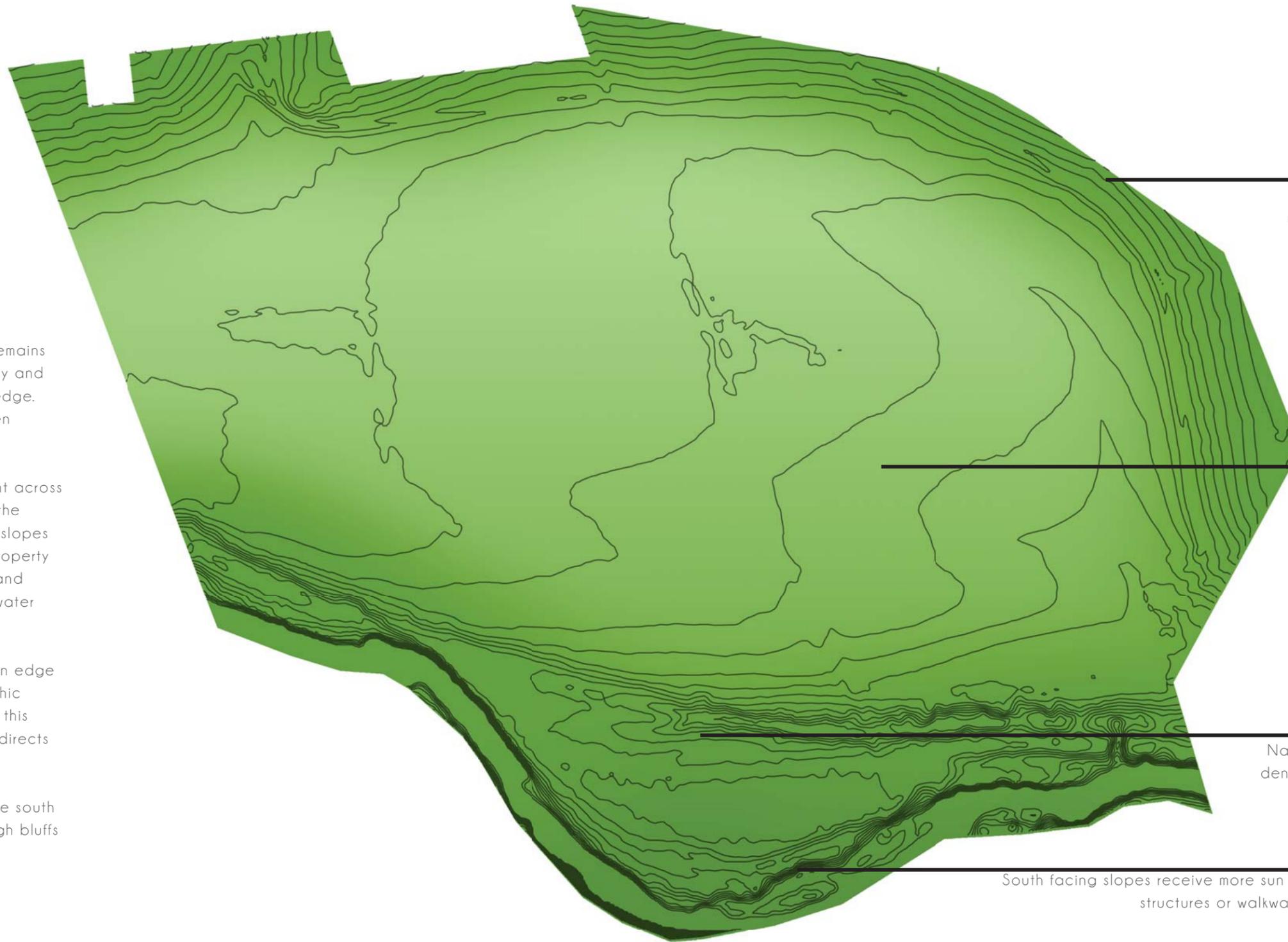
SLOPES

The northern edge of the property remains relatively flat to contain the roadway and existing homesteads bordering this edge. The site quickly drops off to the open prairie at slopes up to 10%.

A 5% maximum slope remains constant across the site to the tree line located on the south edge of the property. Gentle slopes to the south and southeast of the property allow for vegetation to grow freely and storm water to infiltrate the ground water supply.

The wooded area along the southern edge contains most of the site's topographic change. Natural swales cut through this area of the site which subsequently directs water to the river.

The San Gabriel River located on the south side of the property is flanked by high bluffs and eroded edges.



**5 - 10% SLOPES**

Provides a good visual barrier from the roadway. Possible erosion can occur. Not ideal for roadways.

**0 - 5% SLOPES**

Ideal for roadways and walkways. Receives a high amount of solar radiation.

**10 - 15% SLOPES**

Natural swales and steep slopes combined with dense vegetation. Suitable for passive uses. Not ideal for vehicular or structural use.

**15+% SLOPES**

South facing slopes receive more sun in the winter. Not ideal for structures or walkways. Surface erosion is high.



**GENTLE SLOPE**

The gentle slope of the land across the main open space of the site allows for dramatic views.



**DYNAMIC EDGE**

The exposed bluff on the south edge of the site displays the geographic formations caused by the San Gabriel.



**ERODED SLOPES**

Steep slopes cut by the river line the southern edge of the site. The sharp edges easily erode away presenting a potential hazard.



VEGETATION

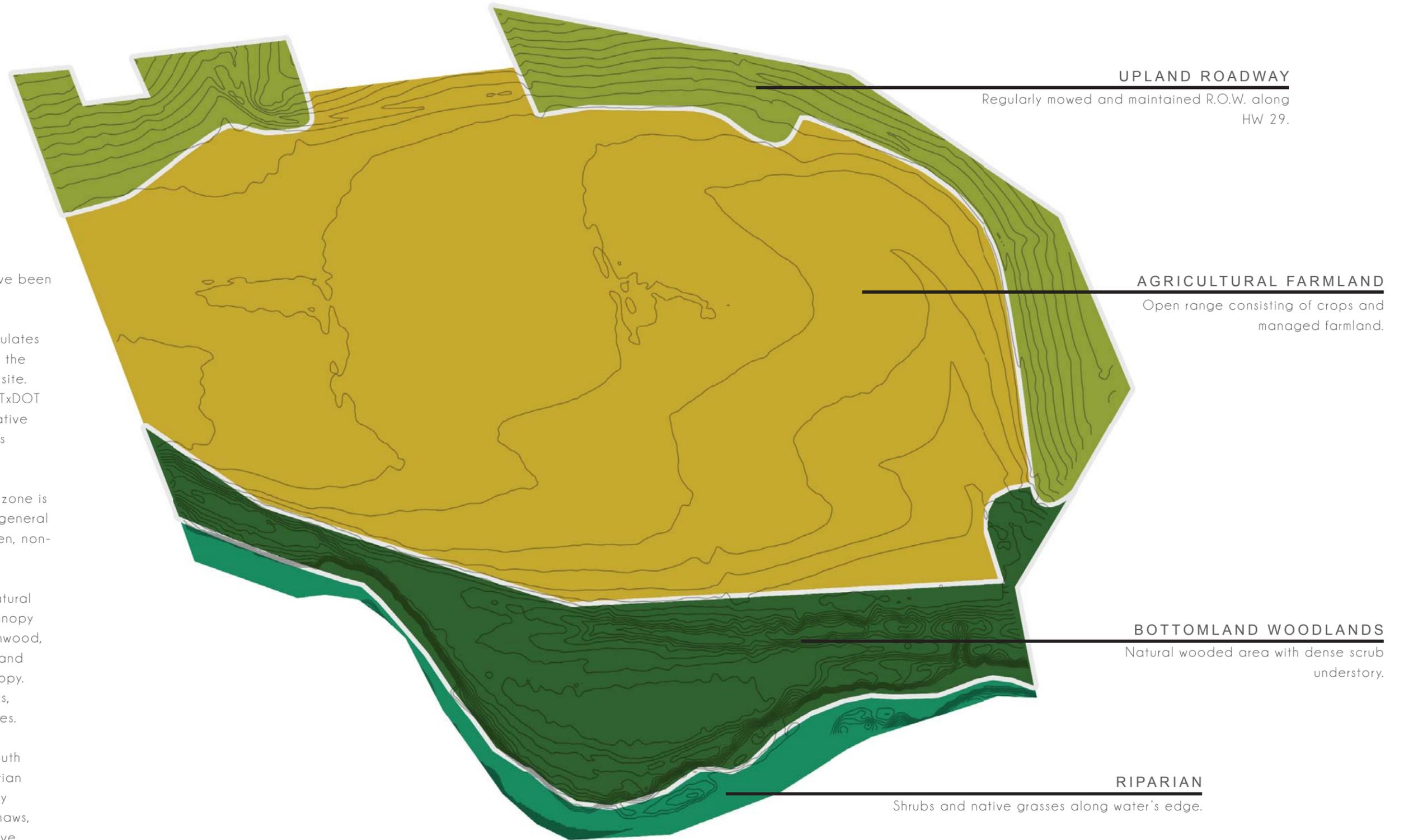
Four different vegetation zones have been identified and delineated.

The Upland Roadway zone encapsulates the HW 29 R.O.W. and extends into the properties that sit adjacent to the site. This zone consists of the standard TxDOT re-vegetation mix which includes native grasses and wildflowers. This zone is regularly mowed and managed.

Adjacent to the Upland Roadway zone is the Agricultural Farmland zone. In general this zone consists of crops and open, non-maintained farmland.

The Bottomland Woodlands is a natural zone consisting of a dense tree canopy and thick understory scruff. Conttonwood, Sycamore, Native Oak, Cedar Elm and Pecan Trees help make up the canopy. Understory trees consist of Redbuds, Mountain Laurels and Yaupon Hollies.

The San Gabriel River along the south edge of the site contains the Riparian zone. This zone is made up of many low growing plants such as Possumhaws, Agarita, Mexican Buckeye and native grasses.





← **UPLAND ROADWAY**  
Maintained northern edge of the site.  
Contains utilities and existing houses.



→ **BOTTOMLAND WOODLANDS**  
Dense overhead canopy with a thick  
understory. This area provides the only  
natural shade on the site and contains a  
rich ecosystem.



← **AGRICULTURAL FARMLAND**  
Expansive unobstructed views across the  
site. The existing Oncor transmission lines  
cut through the site in the background.



→ **RIPARIAN**  
The San Gabriel River provides the  
southern edge of the site. Water plants,  
native grasses and low growing shrubs fill  
this zone.



LIVE OAK



TEXAS ASH



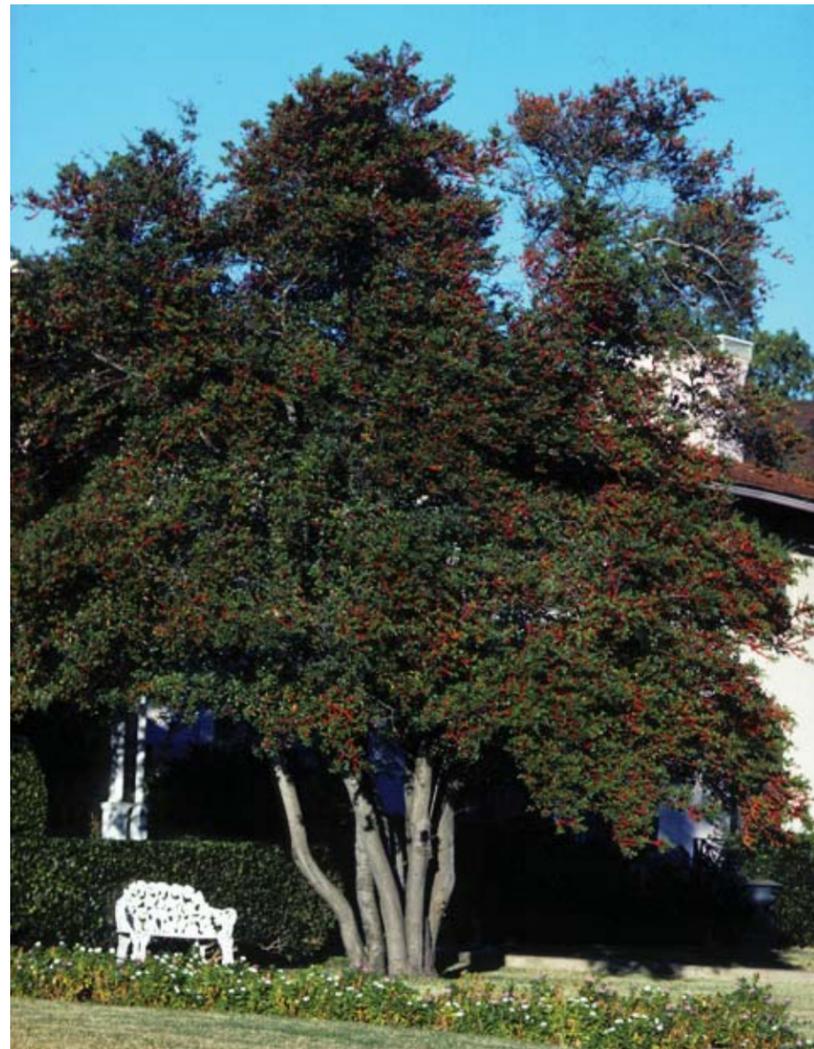
SYCAMORE

### NATIVE VEGETATION

The park site is rich with native agricultural vegetation. A small portion of native prairie grass exists in the most upland portion of the site. The remainder of the upland has been scraped and planted for agricultural purposes. The bottomland region is rich in vegetation consisting of large Pecan, Oak and Ash trees. The understory is thick with grasses and some shrubs such as Little Blue Stem and Sideoats.



CEDAR ELM



YOUPON H OLLY



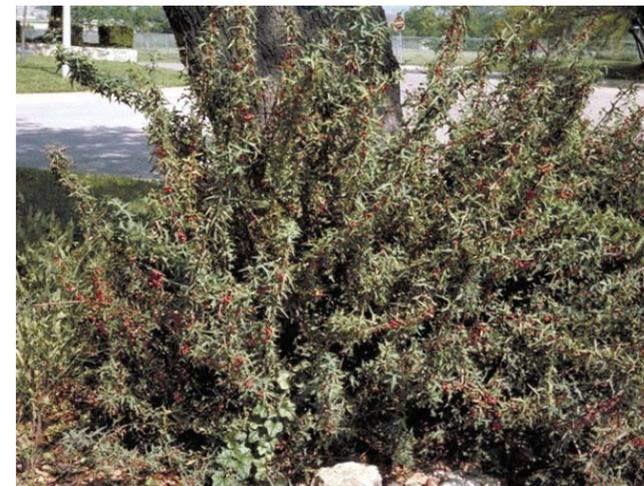
SWITCHGRASS



PINE MUHLY



PECAN



AGARITA



BASKET GRASS



COYOTE



WHITETAIL DEER



ARMADILLO

### NATIVE WILDLIFE

This park site provides a vital resting, feeding, wintering, and nesting grounds for migratory birds and native Texas wildlife. Much of the native wildlife is indicative of the blackland prairie east of the balcones faultline. Some of the more typical species found on site consist of coyote, whitetail deer, armadillo, squirrel, skunk, jack rabbit, possum, morning dove, mockinbird, kingfisher, and great blue heron. These and many other species can be found on any given day at the Blackland Heritage County Park. It is suggested that an extensive inventory be undertaken and an interpretive program be developed for all visitors of the park.



SQUIRREL



SKUNK



MORNING DOVE



KINGFISHER



MOCKINGBIRD



JACK RABBIT



POSSUM



GREAT BLUE HERON

SOILS

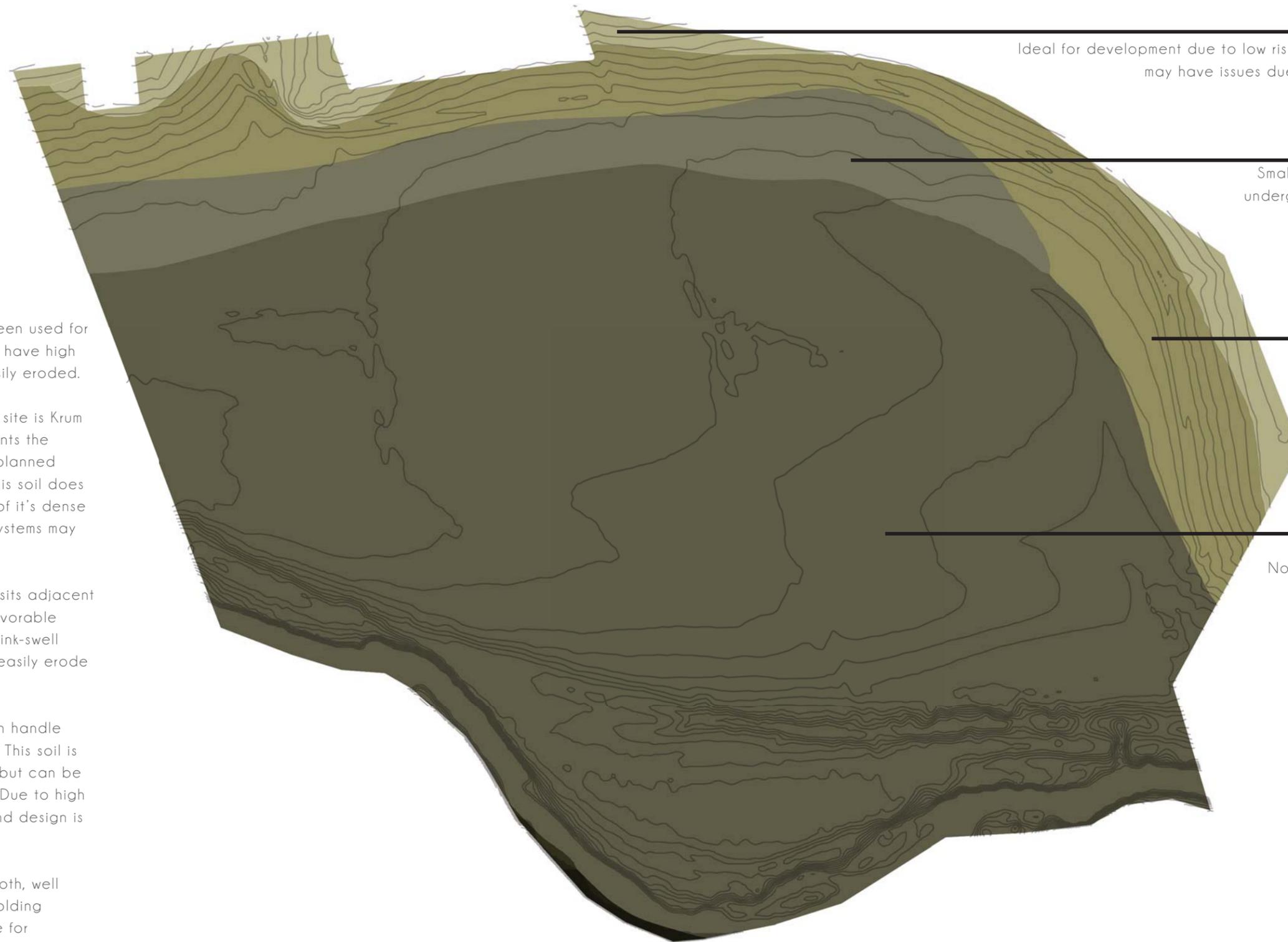
The existing site has primarily been used for agricultural purposes. The soils have high water content and are very easily eroded.

Along the northern edge of the site is Krum Silty Clay (KsB) soil which presents the best possible location for any planned structures and development. This soil does not erode easily, but because of its dense consistency, the use of septic systems may pose a problem.

Altoga Silty Clay Loam (AgC2) sits adjacent to KsB. While this soil is also favorable to building construction, the shrink-swell potential is high. This soil can easily erode if not properly protected.

Sunev Silty Clay Loam (SuB) can handle small and limited development. This soil is corrosive to underground pipe but can be controlled with proper design. Due to high erosion, careful management and design is needed.

Oakalla soils (Oa | Of) are smooth, well drained and have high water holding capacity. They are not suitable for buildings due to frequent flooding and erosion but ideal for crops and uses that withstand frequent flooding.



**KsB SOILS**

Ideal for development due to low risk of erosion. Septic systems may have issues due to slow permeability rates.

**SuB SOILS**

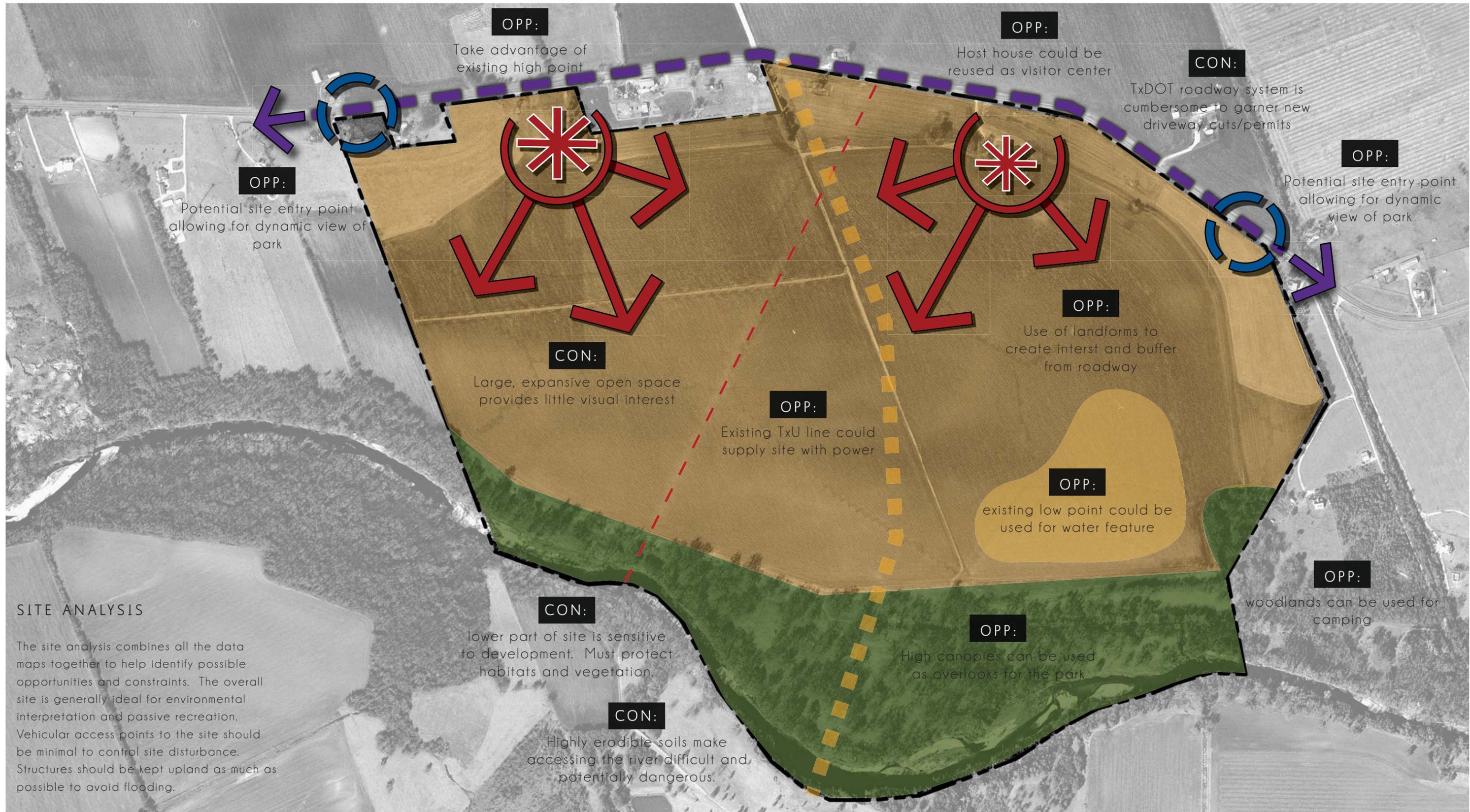
Small development is permitted, corrosive to underground pipes, ideal for recreational use.

**AgC2 SOILS**

Well drained soil with a high water holding capacity. Can handle limited building development.

**Oa | Of SOILS**

Slow runoff, ideal for crops and farming. Not recommended for development due to high risk of flooding.



**SITE ANALYSIS**

The site analysis combines all the data maps together to help identify possible opportunities and constraints. The overall site is generally ideal for environmental interpretation and passive recreation. Vehicular access points to the site should be minimal to control site disturbance. Structures should be kept upland as much as possible to avoid flooding.



## INTRODUCTION

For the past 100 years, a precious 348-acre landscape has stood its ground against a growing and urbanizing Williamson County. Withstanding the rigors of farming and impact of new major roadways, this parcel has been farmed and degraded, yet maintains its rich history and potential to regenerate the wonders of the shrinking native landscape. Heritage oaks still stand tall through invasion of foreign species and thick brush. The historic grassland surface remains beneath the pioneer thickets. Animal and bird species find food and shelter within its habitats. The historic homestead still resides at its northern reach. Located within Williamson County and nestled among municipalities, the site is in a unique position to thrive as a regional, nature-based park as it demonstrates how human enjoyment and ecological function can and must support each other.

The park remains a precious parcel but does not stand alone as the San Gabriel River forms a strong ecological and recreational ally to the west. Connecting to the San Gabriel River through its local hydrology and the regional greenway lends the Park to an even larger presence in the county and sustains its ability to thrive.

Great parks allow people to rejuvenate and refresh themselves in the landscape, both consciously and subconsciously. As Frederick Law Olmsted suggested, the rejuvenation from city life happens effortlessly as you experience a landscape different from your daily life. Additionally, city parks are rich landscapes of learning and optimal places to create living laboratories where people can be active participants in the natural processes of the park.

The sign of a great park is a visitor's ability to understand, implicitly or explicitly, the primary structure or the "bones" of the landscape. A good framework allows the park to adapt over time as the cultural and ecological needs of the county change and grow, while maintaining a cohesive vision of the park in people's minds. This framework will allow the county to provide a variety of nature-based recreational opportunities in an environmentally sound and sensitive manner. This resulting vision becomes a framework for a park's use and development over a 20 to 30 year time period.

The process in which to achieve that began when the county acquired the parkland in 2009 from the Byers family as part of a county-wide vision to acquire parkland for the preservation of natural lands and the provision of nature-based recreational opportunities in one of the fastest growing regions of Texas and at that time the country. In May of 2011, Baker-Aicklen + Associates (BA), in combination with Luck Design Team, was commissioned by the county to develop a master plan for this particular parkland tract. The team at BA outlined a process in which to develop the master plan within a 5 month process for adoption by the Commissioners Court.

Upon commission, the BA team outlined an effective and efficient planning and communication process that began with the site and ended with the stakeholders.

## BRAINSTORMING

The development of this park will add to the extensive system of parks within Williamson County. The design team met with the various park directors from the surrounding communities to learn about their wishes for the new park. Meeting on-site allowed for the design team and the park directors to develop ideas based on the site conditions. Beginning with an introduction to the site, the design team gave an overview of the site to the directors, covering acreage, utilities, adjacent uses, floodplains and topography. Based on ideas and questions that arose during the morning introduction, the team ventured out to further familiarize themselves with the site. Leaving the vehicles and walking the site helped to drum up ideas for the various aspects of the site. Based on the directors' input, a program list was developed in which to hold community discussions.

## DIRECTORS MEETING

An on-site meeting with various Williamson County Park Directors to develop ideas for what the Blackland Park can become.





←  
**CONCEPT IMAGES**

A collage of images representing ideas and concepts generated from the design process.

**GATHERING INPUT and COMMUNICATING**

Park design begins with a public dialogue about the aspirations for a county's new public place. Charged with creating a county-wide regional park, the design team worked with the Commissioners Court and the Director of Parks and Recreation to develop a method of integrating citizen input with the Master Plan design process. In June of 2011, a series of focus group meetings and public workshops were held to reach out to municipalities, stakeholders and key interest groups across the county in an effort to include the diverse groups representative of Williamson County. Each meeting included informational presentations by the design team and the county.

At these meetings, the design team was able to provide design progress through conceptual drawings and imagery that conveyed park use strategies. Community feedback on these design strategies was solicited through the exercise utilizing a red dot | green dot approach and general feedback, and, as a result, themes for programming and park uses were then derived. These themes combined with intensive site analysis have become the foundation for the Master Plan. Community meetings and work sessions were also coupled with site tours and events, organized and led by the Parks and Recreation Department. Scheduled in sync with meeting dates, these tours and events offered the public an opportunity to experience the park in its existing conditions, inspiring a sense of stewardship for the park from the onset. The establishment of the park's blog site: <http://byerstractpark.blogspot.com/> has also enabled the public to be informed on the park planning and design process.



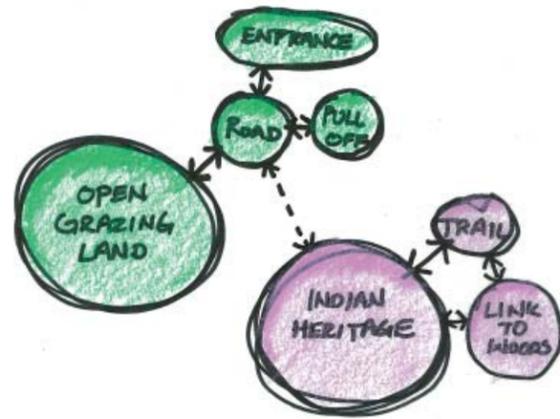
**PROGRAMMING THE PARK**

→  
**COMMUNITY INPUT**

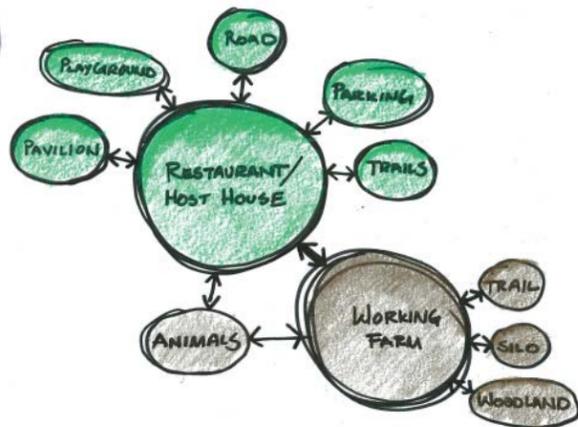
Meeting with members of the public and various interest groups to better understand what the community wants in a new park.



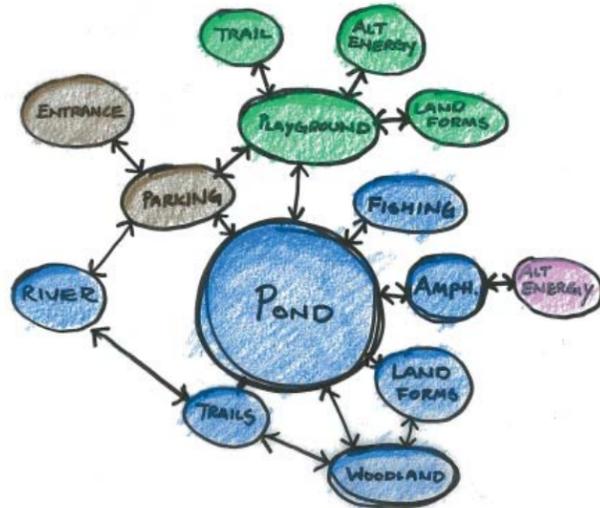
## THE LAST FRONTIER



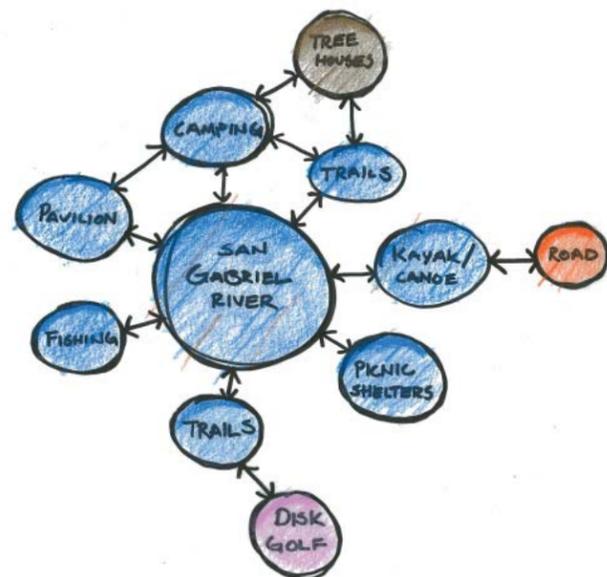
## LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE



## A NEW HOPE



## WOODLANDS + RIVER



The development of this park will add to the extensive system of parks within Williamson County. From the focus group meetings the programmatic needs and opportunities were identified, listed and evaluated against the goals and site capacity of the parks. A variety of opportunities subsequently rose to the surface and were discussed and evaluated against program items being served and addressed in other parks within the region so as to minimize competitive conflicts and promote synergistic relationships among the parks serving the region.

### PATCHES:

#### THE LAST FRONTIER

- main entry feature/sign
- landforms
- loop road
- security
- expansive open space
- canoe/kayak parking
- loop trail
- link to woodlands

#### LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

- working farmland
- landforms
- farm equipment
- ag. commercial opportunities
- grain silo
- viewing tower
- small parking
- loop trail connection
- loop road
- pecan orchard
- farm animals | hands on area
- buffers from adjacent uses
- mule barn

#### A NEW HOPE

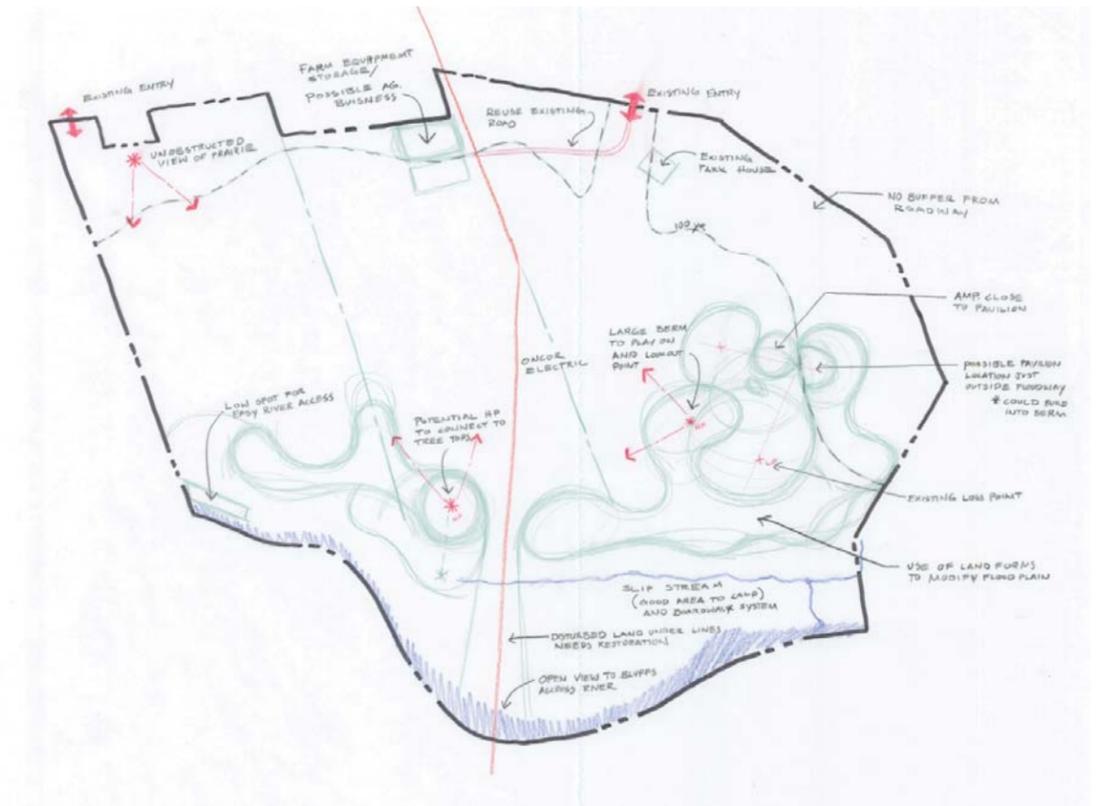
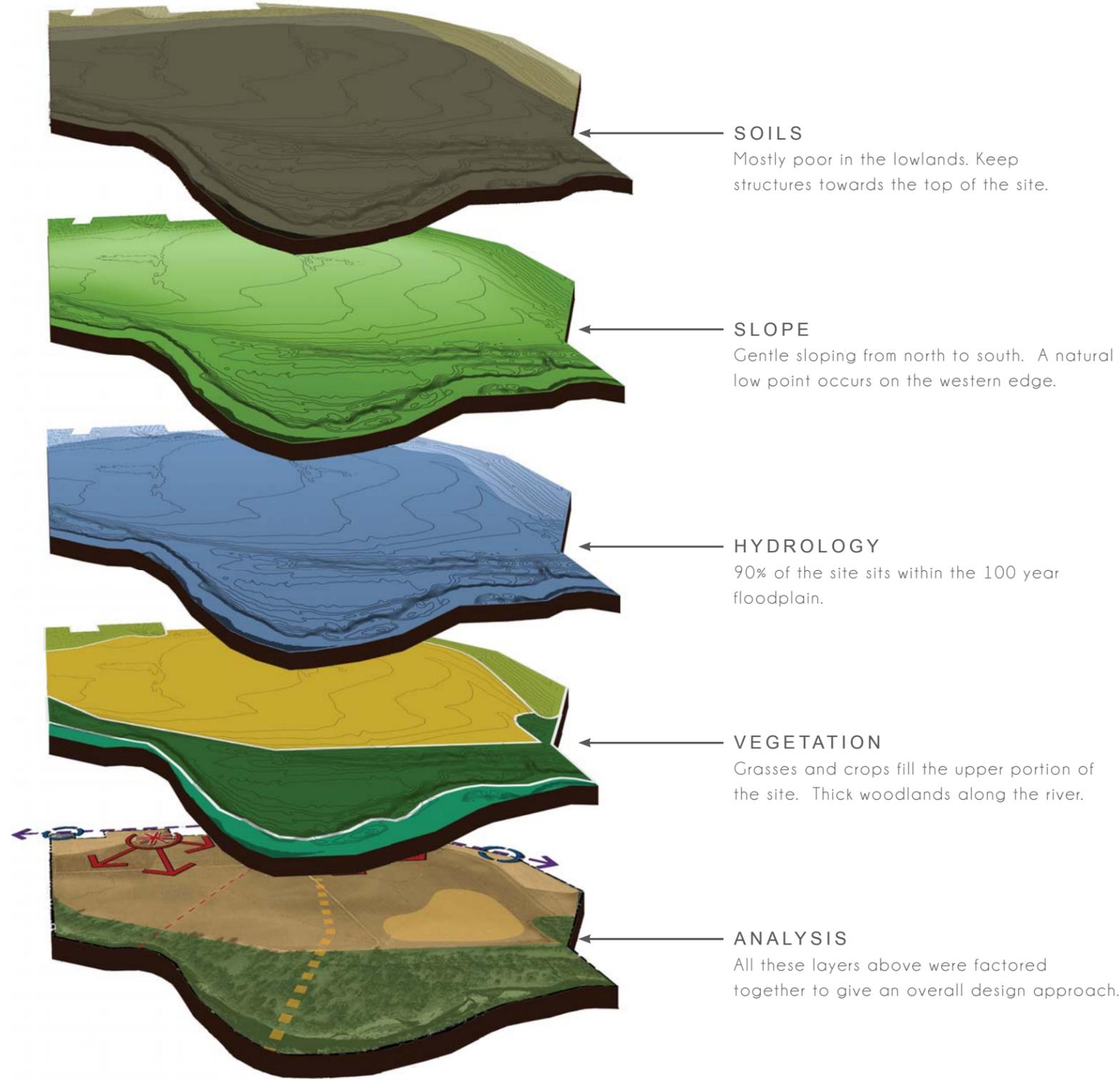
- pond
- landforms
- alternative energy
- grass paver parking lots
- amphitheater
- second entry point
- buffer from roadway
- fishing access
- natural playground
- hill slide
- water-playground
- large corporate pavilion
- group camping
- cabins
- lookout point
- host house
- birthday pavilions
- gateway to woodlands

#### RIVER LANDS

- trail system
- loop trail
- picnic pavilions
- hike in camping
- tree top walkways
- tree houses
- low water crossings
- connections to river
- canoe | kayak entry

### ← RELATIONSHIP DIAGRAMS

The first step to understand how the program elements will relate to one-another within the park.



**↑ APPROACH**

The first step of the design process, laying over the analysis with tracing paper and working through spatial planning and design ideas.

**DEVELOPING THE CONCEPTS**

Subsequently, the design team was able to congeal the intense site analysis with the programmatic input and direction from the public input and begin developing a series of three concepts as variations on a theme. Staying true to the theme which emerged from the public's input, the three concepts were presented and discussed among the design team and subsequently were refined and revised into the master plan presented in the following section.



## CONCEPT 1

- Circulation brings vehicular traffic to the southern edge of the property, away from HW 29
- The Farmland zone is accessed from the first entry point, off the main loop road
- Incorporating a Native American heritage exhibit
- The overhead electric line divides the Farmland zone from the New Hope zone
- Development requiring built structures are pushed outside the existing 100yr flood zone
- The amphitheater, group pavilion and play area are separated by the pond

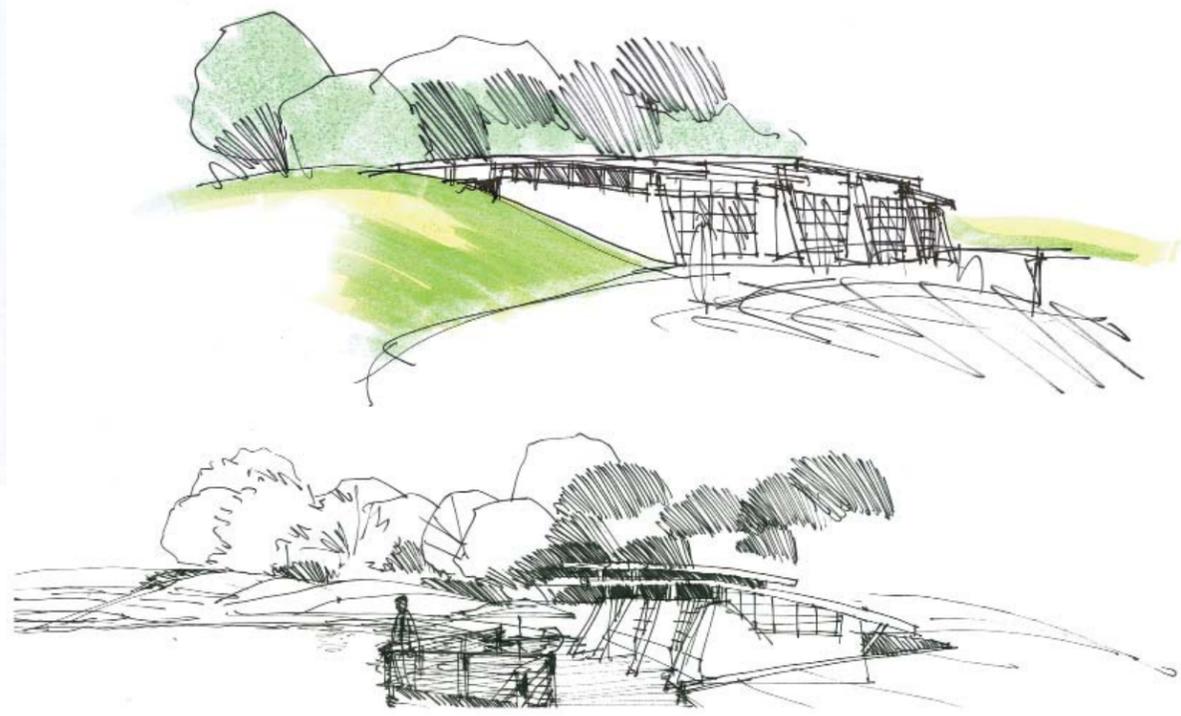


CONCEPT 2

- 2 entry points
- Vehicular circulation is kept to the absolute minimum, keeping the roadway at the northern portion of the site.
- A secondary access road to the kayak launch is from the first entry point off the loop road
- The upland zones are divided by the out parcel along HW 29.
- The amphitheater and group pavilion are in close proximity allowing for the pond to separate this high intensity area to be separated from the play area
- Artistic landforms separate the upland from the woodlands and adjust the existing floodplain
- Primitive camping areas are separated from boardwalks and tree houses in the Woodlands zone

BUILDING WITH THE LAND

Exploring ideas for how to provide a large gathering space in the New Hope zone without creating an eye sore in the landscape. Green roof structures, and structures built into the land are sketched out here.





### CONCEPT 3

- 2 entry points
- Vehicular circulation again travels along the southern end of the site to take visitors away from the HW
- The eastern Farmland zone edge is defined by the overhead electric line
- A large viewing tower is situated at the bottom of the Farmland zone
- The group pavilion and play area are in close proximity allowing for the amphitheater to sit alone
- A large pond separates the uses
- Camping, boardwalks and tree top structures are mixed together in the Woodlands zone.

### VIEWING NATURE

The topographic change within the woodlands zone presents an opportunity to bring the walkways above the ground.







## INSPIRATION

The master plan, as illustrated, is a series of "patches" that symbolizes the historical American relationship and interaction with the land. Richard Louv, in his thought provoking book, "The Last Child in the Woods", pens that basic American cultural traits can be linked to the influence of the western frontier - its exploration, romance and settlement. The Blackland Heritage County Park Master Plan celebrates and learns from this portion of history, and provides activities to reconnect with those basic American virtues of courage and exploration that has so defined our national character.



### ENTRY INTO THE LAST FRONTIER

The western patch of the Blackland Heritage County Park occurs in "The Last Frontier" and celebrates the American connection with the land up through the turn of the 20th Century. This period of time, from circa 1800 to 1903, featured Americans migrating west in search of land, discovery and opportunity. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner espoused, basic American cultural traits can be linked to the influence of this frontier exploration, including "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness... that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism.

Entrance into the park off of Texas Highway 29 is marked by a monument representative in character of the 1930's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) architecture that characterizes many of the state parks in Texas. It promotes use of materials indigenous to the area and architectural forms that borrow from historical structures constructed by the CCC in many parks throughout the United States. Local examples of CCC architecture can be found as close as Bastrop State Park - a mere thirty miles from the Blackland Heritage County Park site.

The principal design component of the "Last Frontier" patch is the rolling native grassland prairie that greets visitors at the entry. Much of the native black land prairie in the State of Texas today is greatly altered from its historical state because of farming or development practices. This section of the park aims to restore approximately fifty acres of land to the prairie conditions that welcomed settlers in the 1800s's. Native grasses will be planted and managed (including prescribed burns) to simulate the wild Blackland Prairie environment.

### BLACKLAND PRAIRIE

Restoration of the historic blackland prairie provides visitors a view into history.



One of the goals of this master plan is to achieve a successful and memorable experience for visitors upon immediate entry into the park. As part of that endeavor, the master plan promotes the inclusion of a small herd of buffalo or longhorn sculptures to roam the prairie. This experience directly ties park patrons to these animals that are so symbolic of Texas and its history. It also ensures an immediate successful park experience moments after entering the gate. The journey from the parks west entry point begins the visitor's progression into and through the park. The roadway section through the "The Last Frontier" is conducive to the same look and driving experience of traveling the Old El Camino wagon trail in 19th century Texas. The roadway is narrow, wide enough for single vehicle passage with periodic broad shoulders for passing. This provides an intimate experience while passing through the park. Vehicular access leading down to the river and the canoe and kayak trailhead is similar in width situated at the parks western most confluence with the San Gabriel River, the canoe and kayak trailhead gives visitors optimum access to the river. Parking accommodates up to 12 vehicles (with space for trailers) and park amenities such as a shade pavilion, benches, kiosk, restrooms and nearby remote camping facilities are located at the trailhead.

### BUFFALO STATUES

A status depicting the historic buffalo hunts which once occurred on these prairies.



### PRAIRIE ROAD

The roadway for The Last Frontier should mimic an unimproved road such as this. Other zones are to have road types to match the theme of the zone.



### ENTRY FEATURE

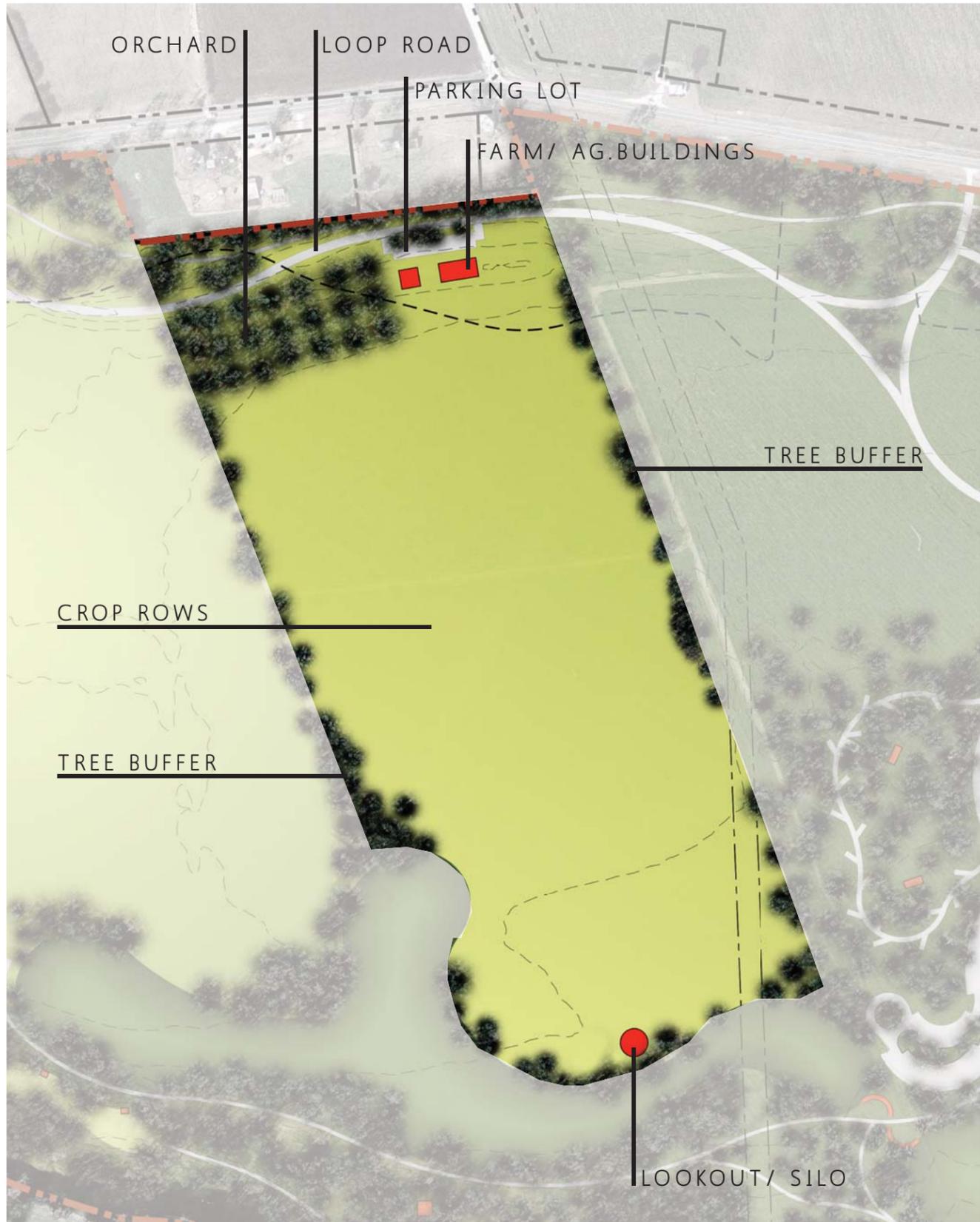
The entry sign should relate to the character of the site. The use of stone, wood and oxidized metal letters set the mood for the visitor.



### JOGGING TRAIL

A natural looking jogging trail will blend into the landscape while keeping joggers on path with a low profile buffer fence between the trail and the roadway.



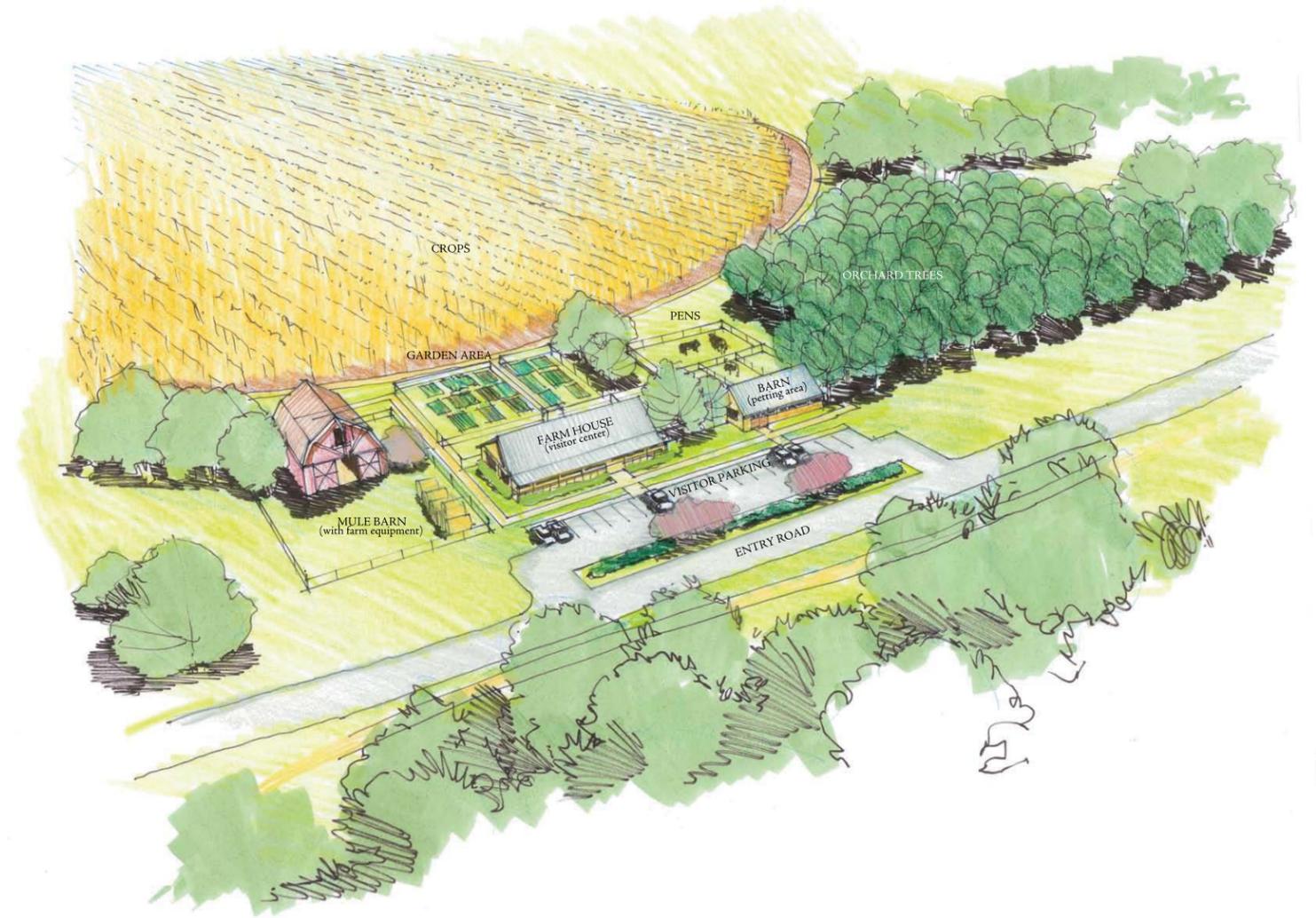


**PARK POND**

A natural low point on the site presents an excellent opportunity to create a water feature. Surrounding the pond sit a green pavilion, island overlook, amphitheater and an extensive boardwalk system to walk the perimeter of the pond.

**LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE**

Louv writes that the first frontier closed with the 1890 US Census, when a clear contiguous line of demarcation for the American frontier was no longer discernible. The second frontier sequence was the romanticizing of the frontier which was represented by the taming or farming of the land as people began to settle west. Settlers were hands on with the land and their environment and celebrated their direct connection between people and their food source. Much of the early history of the settlement of Texas (and even the rural landscape of Texas today) reflects this migration and settlement of the land. The "Little House on the Prairie" patch celebrates this time in the county's history and its overriding goal to get people back in touch with the history of the land. A large portion of this patch is designated for agricultural use and the county will look to partner with local farmers in the area for outsourcing this part of the park. Approximately forty acres (40 Ac.) of the park will be used to grow corn, cotton or grain based crops. Visitors can experience the





← **GARDENING**

Families can reconnect with nature together. Tending to the community gardens and picking their own vegetables.



← **ARCHITECTURE**

Architecture representing the farm our ancestors lived on.



← **PLAY**

Letting the children's imagination run wild as they play on real farm equipment and feed the livestock used to keep the farm running.

growing seasons of the farm from sowing to harvest. In tandem with the field crop area is a community garden area where people may claim space for the growing of their own crops. This encourages people to become vested in the park and get in tune with the land. An orchard grove of fruit or nut bearing trees is planned in close proximity at which people may harvest and again have a hands-on, successful park experience. The trail head for the "Little House on the Prairie" patch is based on a farming prototype. An approximately 2000 SF "farm house" will greet visitors and serve as a visitor center. This building houses park staff, serves as a meeting place and venue where interpretive signage and education may take place. The farm house will also serve as a seasonal store, offering visitors the opportunity to purchase harvested crops and light snacks prepared from the recent harvest. Directly off the rear of the Farm House sits a series of community garden plots. These plots may be rented by local residents to maintain and grow fruits and vegetables of their choice. Two barns accompany the farm house, a hay barn and a mule barn, which serve an aesthetic function as well as an educational opportunity.

A Mule Barn

Adjacent to the mule barn is a pen area where mules and/or horses are traditionally housed and can go in and out of the barn for shelter from the elements. The part of Central Texas where Blackland Heritage County Park is located was historically spotted with Mule Barns. The master plan dedicates an area of the "farm" that will have a replica of a mule barn and actual farm equipment that people may see and learn about.

→ **LOOKOUT TOWER**

An old grain silo sits at the back of the land. Climb to the top to enjoy the majestic view over the land.





HOST HOUSE AND PARKING

LOOP TRAIL

PARKING

ISLAND OVERLOOK

AMPHITHEATER

RETREAT PAVILION

LANDFORMS

PARK POND

CABINS

GROUP CAMPING

DISCOVERY PLAYGROUND

PARKING

INTERACTIVE WATER PLAYGROUND

### THE THIRD FRONTIER

Bifurcating the site is the ONCOR utility easement and one hundred foot towers that visually dominate the site. The master plan considers this easement and the power corridor to be symbolic of where society is right now: The Third Frontier. Richard Louv scribes in, "The Last Child in the Woods", that we as a society are currently in this third frontier that "is characterized by at least five trends: severance of the public mind from our food origins; a disappearing line between machines, humans and other animals; an increasingly intellectual understanding of our relationship with other animals; the invasion of our cities by wild animals ( even as urban suburban designers replace wilderness with synthetic nature; and the rise of a new kind of urban form"(that offers fewer places for natural play). This Third Frontier is based on technological advancements. Representatively, people are tied to the "grid" where many of life's conveniences are supported.

### The Final Frontier: A New Hope

As the park entry road passes under the transmission line, visitors pass through to a new hope of play and exploration. This is an area where we can "unplug" and experience both the active and passive wonders of nature play. The iconic feature that serves as the back bone of the 'New Hope' area is the park pond and surrounding landforms. Providing an approximate 18 acres of surface area, the pond is situated to take advantage of the natural drainage areas patterns of the site. Excavated material from the lake forms the earthen landforms that nestle the southern portion of the lake. On a site that is relatively flat and expansive, the landforms create an elevation change providing the viewer a different perspective of the park. These landforms will also provide natural play areas for "king of the mountain" activities and other recreational free-play activities. A discovery playground in the form of a depressed earthen bowl will also accentuate these land forms.



←  
**PARK POND**

A natural low point on the site presents an excellent opportunity to capture the sites stormwater and create a water feature. Surrounding this pond or "tank", as Texans typically refer to them, sits a "green" pavilion, island overlook, amphitheater and an extensive boardwalk system to walk the perimeter of the pond.



← **GRASS PAVER PARKING**

A grass parking lot will drastically reduce the heat island affect and assist in dealing with the surface run-off as well as the hot Texas summers.



← **AMPHITHEATER**

Sitting on the edge of the pond the amphitheater uses the pond and tree line as the backdrop. The amphitheater is sited in close proximity to the large pavilion and the parking lot to accommodate all events.



← **LANDFORMS**

Artistic berms winding through the landscape divide the various uses from the woodland area while controlling flooding.

**EARTH STRUCTURES**

↓ Pavilions built into the landscape instead of on top of it. Earth structures allow for the buildings to blend seamlessly into the landscape while using the earth as natural insulation and protection.

The park pond hosts a variety of nature based opportunities in which to explore, engage and learn. It provides a recreational venue for kayaking, canoeing and catch and release fishing, however, swimming will not be encouraged. An eighty foot long pier in the center of the lake allows for "bank" fishing and the occasional crowdad catching. Also, central to the pond is an island overlook. This feature provides a visual anchor to the lake and allows panoramic vistas and sight lines to the other amenities surrounding the pond. East of the lake is the retreat pavilion. Architecturally intertwined with the built up landform, it is approximately 3,200 square feet. The pavilion is proposed to function in a flexible manner, as both open-air or closed-conditioned space, as desired. Materials for the building remain rustic yet refined. Envisioned uses for the building include staff or corporate retreats, small weddings or other similar activities. The pavilion may be reserved and rented per the needs of the County.

Adjacent to the retreat pavilion is an amphitheater that abuts the park pond. Intimate in nature, the amphitheater accommodates a maximum of two-hundred people and is a combination of turf and cut stone materials. Perimeter tree plantings provide natural shade for the amphitheater. Roadway and parking for sixty vehicles supports these east side activities.





### ← WATER SPRAY

Here a child learns that they must stop on this peddle to shoot water out of nearby jets.

The west side of the pond supports a variety of activities for the daily park user. Air-conditioned cabins and a designated group camping area front the lake and a parking area for 130 vehicles terminates the end of the loop drive. An interactive water-play area nestles into the landform at the south end of the pond. The playground features an overhead water spray system reminiscent of the overhead irrigation system used for large farm crop irrigation. A loop trail and boardwalk system borders the pond and connects to the 2.5 mile decomposed granite loop trail.

### HILL SLIDE

↓ A slide integrated into the slope of a hill is a great way to incorporate a classic playground element into nature.



### ← SPLASHING

This young boy enjoys the simple activity of splashing in water as it pours out from the rocks



### ← WATER ENGINEERING

A ravine of water is captured by a water wheel powered by the children. The water is lifted up from the ravine and into a series of aqueducts for further play.







SILO VIEWING  
TOWER

TREE TOP  
BOARDWALK

BOARDWALK

WALKWAY | TRAIL

WALKWAY | TRAIL

←  
LOOKOUT TOWER

Nestled at the back of the crop rows sits a silo modified to also be a lookout tower. The trick is finding out how to get to the top.



← **TREE TOP WALKWAYS**

Boardwalks bring users above the natural grade and into to the tree canopies allowing a new experience with nature.



← **TREE HOUSES**

These may be rented for an office retreat or stay overnight with your significant other.



← **BOARDWALKS**

A way to keep users on a defined path through the woods. Boardwalks help to create a sense of place.

**RIVER LANDS**

At the terminus to the park loop road is the “gateway” to the river. Approximately, one quarter of the acreage of the park is in the area along the river characterized by sloping terrain and canopy hardwoods. The southern boundary of the park is formed by the San Gabriel River and provides an area for avid exploration and play.

A loop trail gently meanders through the forested area and in other areas, where opportunity allows, are interconnected treetop boardwalks, allowing visitors to view and experience the park at various perspectives. As terrain dictates, the path elevates to address both accessibility and floodplain concerns.

The trail also links the various play elements of the forest. Tree top cabins are essentially enclosed “nests” that vary in form within the river forest area. These oasis pavilions allow for views towards the San Gabriel River and the ability to function as a wilderness tree house. Also provided is a “birthday pavilion” for small group gatherings. This particular pavilion may be reserved to accommodate parties or staging areas for adventure birthday parties.





← **PAVILIONS**  
 Designed and built to blend into the existing character of the River Lands and to sustain floodwaters.



← **CANOE/KAYAK**  
 Designated launch and recovery points are located along the rivers edge

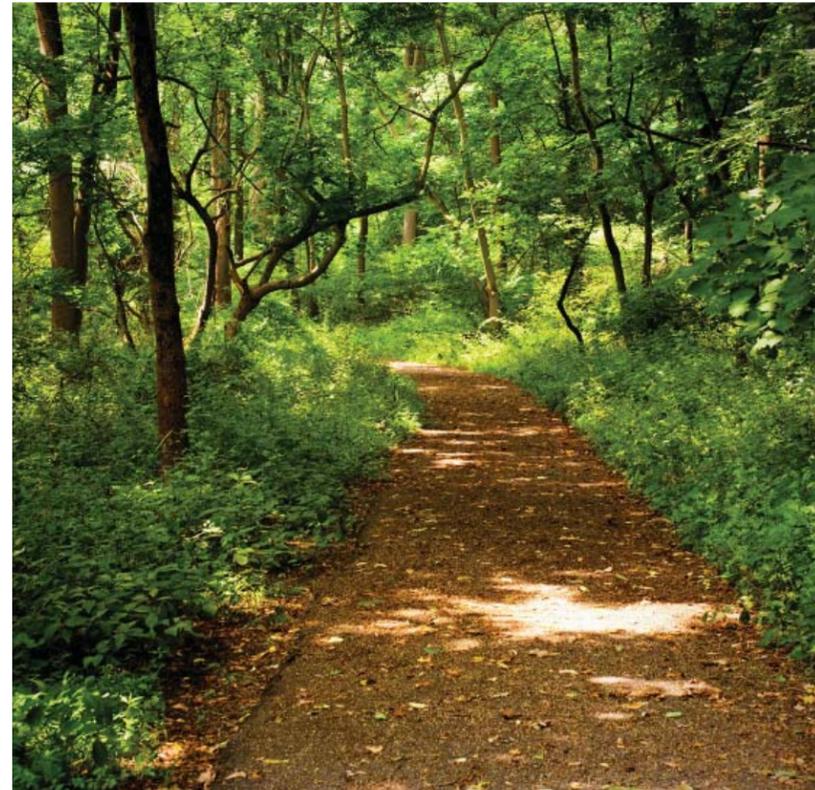


← **PRIMITIVE CAMPING**  
 Hike in camping spots allows visitors to carry their own camping gear to designated locations for a more primitive experience.

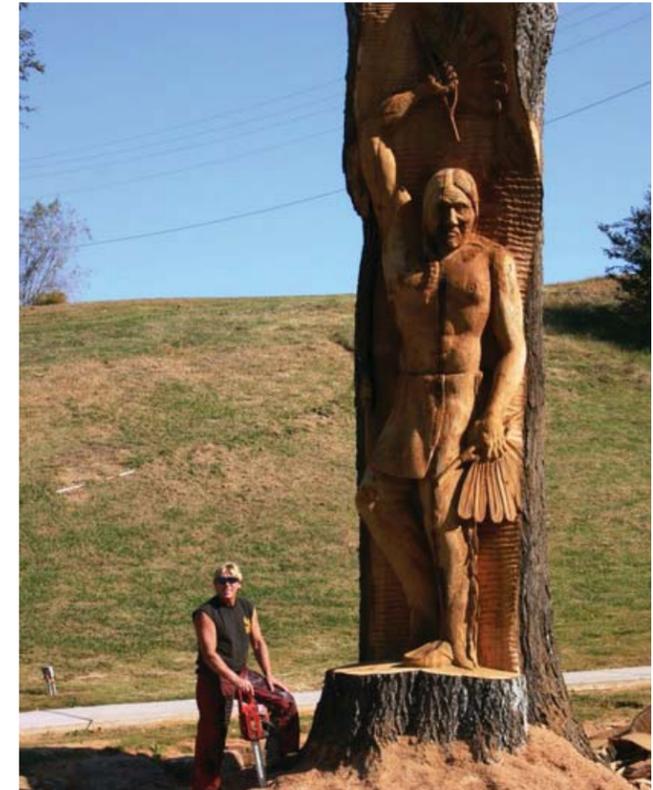
**GATEWAY**  
 Transitioning between the New Hope and the River Lands,



→ **TRAILS**  
 Compacted earth and granite trails blend into the natural environment



**HIDDEN ART**  
 Tree stumps provide an opportunity to introduce artwork into the landscape. Prompting users to explore the park looking for other hidden artwork.





### PRESERVATION OF THE LAND

A vast majority of the existing parkland is preserved or restored in this master plan. A total of 78%, leaving 22% of the park being programmed for park uses which require heavy traffic and site disturbance. This allows visitors to enjoy the natural beauty of the existing site and allows for the natural land to care for itself.

- LAND LEFT UNTOUCHED - 30%**  
Preservation of existing land - trails and primitive camping are present
- DEDICATED OPEN SPACE - 30%**  
Land not used for program elements - trails and access drives present
- RESTORED FARMLAND - 18%**  
Dedicated farmland absent of park elements - trails and buffers from adjacent uses are present
- PARK PROGRAM ELEMENTS - 22%**  
Landscape has been modified for park elements.



## CIRCULATION

Access within the park is provided in two manners, foot traffic and vehicular traffic. Drives and roadways are kept to a minimum in order to minimize disturbance and encourage visitors to exit their cars to explore the park. An access road is located on the most northern edge of the site, to leave the majority of the park free of vehicular traffic. A single branch extends into the New Hope region to give access for specific uses and general parking. A trail system circulates throughout the park, providing a total over 2.5 miles of a loop trail and over 3 miles of total hike and bike trails.



## HYDROLOGY

Adhering to the existing hydrology of the site, the proposed design collects off-site runoff into a large regional pond that also serves as a major focal point of the park. Large berms help to contain the pond water and discharge overflow at predetermined breakthrough points.





The Master Plan is the first step in the process of fulfilling the vision of the great 21st century park. It provides a guiding framework for the development of Blackland Heritage Park over time, beginning the process to identify specific phases of construction to follow. Being 348 acres and featuring ambitious program elements such as the Agricultural Heritage, Center Conference Center and a xx acre lake the Blackland Heritage Park will necessitate a development process that is flexible and adaptable to changing economic, social and environmental conditions.

The goal of setting 40% of the park for development and establishment of farmland areas means implementation will occur in phases. The park development process includes site preparation, establishing target areas, monitoring and maintenance. This complex process must be coordinated with site ecology, management of storm water runoff from disturbed land, conditions and seasons. The implementation of the remaining 60% of the park for landscape restoration and preservation will also correspond to establishing the budget during the next stage of the park development process.

While the Master Plan recognizes a park of this size and program will be implemented in phases, it also acknowledges the sense of urgency to provide a significant park for the county and stakeholders which are currently underserved in this quadrant of Williamson County. To that end, the following steps were identified to continue the momentum of the Master Plan process.

1. Like all successful parks in great cities, partnerships and alliances must be formed between County government, state agencies, Municipal partners, private foundations, stakeholder groups and individual citizens to realize the vision and maintain it for perpetuity.
2. Identify potential public and private funding sources.
3. Conduct further feasibility studies of major program elements identified in the Master Plan.
4. Management plans will be developed in coordination with appropriate departments and partners.

These four steps toward realizing the Master Plan will unfold as the design team continues to develop the Park plan. Throughout the future design phases that progress into the next few years, the design team will continue to work with the Parks and Recreation Department, the county and the community of stakeholders to realize the vision for Blackland Heritage County Park.

#### STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship of the Park does not occur in isolation but as part of a larger network of neighbors, stakeholder groups, local organizations and regional institutions. Taking care of Blackland Heritage Park generates a relationship between the ecologies of the Park and the people who enjoy it. Organized partnerships can foster relationships between people and their environment through the Park in very specific ways including formation of routine volunteer groups and special seasonal events. As Blackland Heritage Park benefits from the efforts of these groups, it also contributes to their missions. Potential collaborations include local and national groups interested in parks and green space, water resources and systems, wildlife health and diversity, native plant health and diversity, cultural history and art, and ecological education and research. The identification of several organizations has only just begun a working and presently growing list of potential partners for Blackland Heritage County Park.



THE NEXT STEP

Blackland Heritage County Park - Opinion of Probable Construction Costs (November 2011)

Zone	Element	Description	Subtotal Per Zone
The Last Frontier	<u>Main Entry</u>	entry sign, lighting, landscaping	<u>\$15,500.00</u>
	<u>Loop Road Connection</u>	rough edge, chip seal roadway (20' wide max)	<u>\$68,000.00</u>
	<u>Maintenance Area</u>	gravel access road (15' max) with storage yard and shed	<u>\$76,200.00</u>
	<u>Blackland Prairie</u>	blackland prairie restoration	<u>\$93,000.00</u>
Little House on the Prairie	<u>Farm Buildings</u>	farm house, mule barn, equipment barn, gardens	<u>\$878,700.00</u>
	<u>Park Road/Parking Lot</u>	rough edge, chip seal roadway (20' wide max)	<u>\$72,275.00</u>
	<u>farmland</u>	crop restoration with loop trail	<u>\$47,700.00</u>
	<u>Silo Lookout tower</u>	Tower and boardwalk connection	<u>\$210,000.00</u>
	<u>Buffer</u>	Tree and stack-rail fence buffer from adjacent uses	<u>\$32,500.00</u>
	The New Hope	<u>Main Entry</u>	entry sign, lighting, landscaping
<u>Park Roads</u>		Asphalt Road CLB (20' wide)	<u>\$201,500.00</u>
<u>Host House</u>		access roadway and parking	<u>\$24,000.00</u>
<u>Amphitheater Parking</u>		grass paver parking lot(190spaces)	<u>\$163,600.00</u>
<u>Amphitheater</u>		Amphitheater with stage	<u>\$75,000.00</u>
<u>Park pond</u>		pond, boardwalk around edge	<u>\$625,000.00</u>
<u>Group Pavilion</u>		large group earth structure recessed into hillside	<u>\$835,000.00</u>
<u>Overlook Hill</u>		Large berm in pond, access path to top, boardwalk across pond	<u>\$99,000.00</u>
<u>Cabin Camping</u>		Group cabins with private parking	<u>\$777,100.00</u>
<u>Group camping</u>		1-way loop drive, parking, pavilion, restrooms	<u>\$269,000.00</u>
<u>River Lands Parking Access</u>		grass paver parking lot	<u>\$303,350.00</u>

Zone	Element	Description	Subtotal Per Zone
	<u>Water Playground</u>	hill slide, interactive water uses, pavilions and access trail	<u>\$1,316,100.00</u>
	<u>Landforms</u>	large organic hills formed to retain pond water	<u>\$360,000.00</u>
	<u>River Lands</u>		
	<u>Gateway</u>	serpentine wall gateway entrance	<u>\$12,000.00</u>
	<u>River Access Road</u>	rough edge, gravel roadway (20' wide max)	<u>\$117,115.00</u>
	<u>Landforms</u>	large organic hills separating uplands from river lands	<u>\$260,000.00</u>
	<u>Tree House</u>	Tree house, boardwalk extension	<u>\$275,000.00</u>
	<u>Canoe/Kayak Launch</u>	loading and unloading point for canoes and kayaks	<u>\$3,000.00</u>
	<u>Primitive Camping</u>	designated camp sites	<u>\$20,000.00</u>
	<u>Trail System</u>	compacted earth trail, connects to loop trail system (5'w)	<u>\$64,400.00</u>
	<u>Miscellaneous</u>		
	<u>Loop Trail Connection</u>	stabilized soil loop trail (10' wide)	<u>\$211,500.00</u>

	<b>\$7,527,040.00</b>
soft costs (design, survey)	\$903,244.80
contingency	\$1,686,056.96
	<b>\$10,116,341.76</b>

**Assumptions/Disclaimers:**

- 1) All Opinion of Probable Construction Costs(OPCC) represent the Consultant and their Sub-Consultant(s) best judgment as professionals, familiar with the construction industry and current available unit pricing; Consultant/Sub-Consultant(s) do not guarantee that proposals, bids or actual project cost will not vary from its opinion of probable construction costs. Quantities are estimates only and the actual amount of work and/or materials are contingent upon final design of these facilities.
- 2) Unit pricing is based on average cost statewide and do not account for any site specific determinates that would effect costs of construction (i.e.- structural foundation/footing per local soil conditions, etc.)
- 3) Basis for payment to contractor for construction costs shall be the actual amount of work done and/or material furnished. Quantities given on final contract documents, including the plans, are estimates only, and the actual amount of work required may differ slightly from the estimates.
- 4) Subtotal of Construction Costs includes a 20% contingency to cover unknown costs (see note 2), mobilization, staging, additional erosion/sedimentation controls, etc. at the level/detail of this OPCC.
- 5) Water, sanitary sewer, gas, electric and communication utility lines and distribution construction and design costs are simply accounted for in contingency cost in this OPCC.
- 6) Permit review and application fees are not accounted for in this OPCC and shall be paid by the Owner.
- \*7) Projection of future construction costs should include a 5% annual increase at a minimum.

