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City of Houston Nature Preserve Ordinance

Kelli Ondracek

City of Houston, Parks and Recreation Department, kelli.ondracek@houstontx.gov

Cassidy Kempt

City of Houston, Parks and Recreation Department, Cassidy.Kempf@houstontx.gov

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City of Houston Nature Preserve Ordinance

The City of Houston's Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) created a first-of-its-kind Nature Preserve Ordinance to protect existing natural habitat within 26 parks totaling 7,423 acres of land. The purpose of this ordinance is to preserve and protect, in perpetuity, city-owned natural areas by regulating public use and development of these lands. The policy protects threatened ecosystems, important water resources, and locally rare plant and wildlife populations.

Keywords

urban forested natural areas, practitioner notes, urban nature, land protection, ordinance, policy, Houston, Texas

CASE OVERVIEW

The City of Houston's Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) created a first-of-its-kind Nature Preserve Ordinance to protect existing natural habitat within 26 parks totaling 7,423 acres of land. The purpose of this ordinance is to preserve and protect, in perpetuity, city-owned natural areas by regulating public use and development of these lands. The policy protects threatened ecosystems, important water resources, and locally rare plant and wildlife populations.



Lake Houston Wilderness Park Nature Preserve

CONTEXT

Prior to the passage of the Nature Preserve Ordinance, HPARD had no official land designation for natural areas within the park system. These natural areas were unprotected from future park development projects and their many benefits were not formally recognized by the department. Through decades of park development without the protection of natural areas, many natural habitats within City parks were removed or highly fragmented. Increased pressure from multiple land use types including stormwater detention projects, pipeline and utility easements, and many recreational park uses highlighted the need to protect these critical holdouts of natural habitat.

GOAL

The outcome of this effort was the passage of the Nature Preserve Ordinance into the City of Houston Code of Ordinances, Chapter 32, Article V. The objectives of the ordinance are to preserve the local plants, wildlife, and natural resources to maintain the biological diversity and



Sylvan Rodriguez Park Nature Preserve

long-term sustainability of Houston's ecology. The creation of the ordinance was a starting point for a broader plan of implementing habitat restoration in degraded natural areas, which will lead to the reestablishment of diverse plant species and native ecosystem processes throughout Houston.

APPROACH

HPARD's Natural Resources Division is tasked with managing natural habitat within the city. Prior to the creation of the Nature Preserve Ordinance, the Natural Resources Division mapped all natural areas within City of Houston parks in the field using GPS units. To identify properties to designate as Nature Preserves, these natural areas were prioritized by size, ecosystem quality, and overall eligibility. Parks that are operated, but not owned, by the City of Houston were not included. The deeds of all parks under consideration were analyzed by the City's Legal Department to ensure eligibility.

Over 7,400 acres of land within 26 parks were selected to be included in the ordinance. HPARD approached community members, partner organizations, other city departments, and City Council members for feedback on the proposed ordinance. The proposed ordinance was included in the City's first resilience plan released in 2020: Resilient Houston.

The ordinance was drafted by Natural Resources Division staff to include the specific restrictions on land development and public use associated with the Nature Preserves. An in-depth review of similar land protection practices among other cities across the United States provided

helpful information while the ordinance was being drafted. Maps were created for each park to show the boundaries of the preserve area.

The ordinance was unanimously approved by City Council. That process involved a public hearing with the opportunity for community members to provide input and express concern or support for the policy. Multiple community members and organizations participated in the public hearing process, and all provided support for the creation of the policy. Supporting organizations included the Texas Nature Conservancy, Houston Audubon, and Houston Parks Board. The ordinance did not garner any public opposition.

RESOURCES

There were no external costs associated with developing the policy. City of Houston staff within the Parks and Recreation Department and Legal Department coordinated efforts to develop the policy. Future fundraising efforts will be initiated to implement goals outlined within the ordinance, such as developing habitat management plans and increasing awareness and education through signage.

KEY RESULTS

- Over 7,400 acres of land protected from future development, providing ecological services to the surrounding communities including improved air and water quality, reduced urban heat island effect, and flood mitigation.
- The ordinance provides a clear mandate for the active management of nature preserves, requiring that HPARD creates management plans for all 26 sites.
- The ordinance directs attention toward often overlooked natural areas within the City of Houston that can be relatively unknown by the public. The Nature Preserve designation provides these areas with a special title that indicates they are important components of the park system.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT

Email: NaturalResources@houstontx.gov

Website: <https://www.houstontx.gov/parks/naturalresources.html>

Video Link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCvQhs_id2I

Ordinance Link:

https://library.municode.com/tx/houston/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COOR_CH32PARTE_ARTVNAPR