

# Rain to River

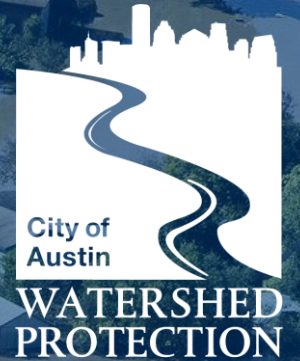
A Strategic Plan to Protect Austin's  
Creeks and Communities

LCRA Water Quality Advisory Committee  
March 30, 2023





# Watershed Protection Department



## MISSION

The Watershed Protection Department (WPD) protects the lives, property, and environment of our community by reducing the impact of flooding, erosion, and water pollution.





# What is the Strategic Plan?

## GUIDING BLUEPRINT FOR DEPARTMENT

- Sets goals and objectives
- Establishes method to prioritize problems
- Creates a process for evaluating solutions

## EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Provides framework for evaluating future programs, projects, and regulations and measuring success of current portfolio

## COMMUNICATION TOOL

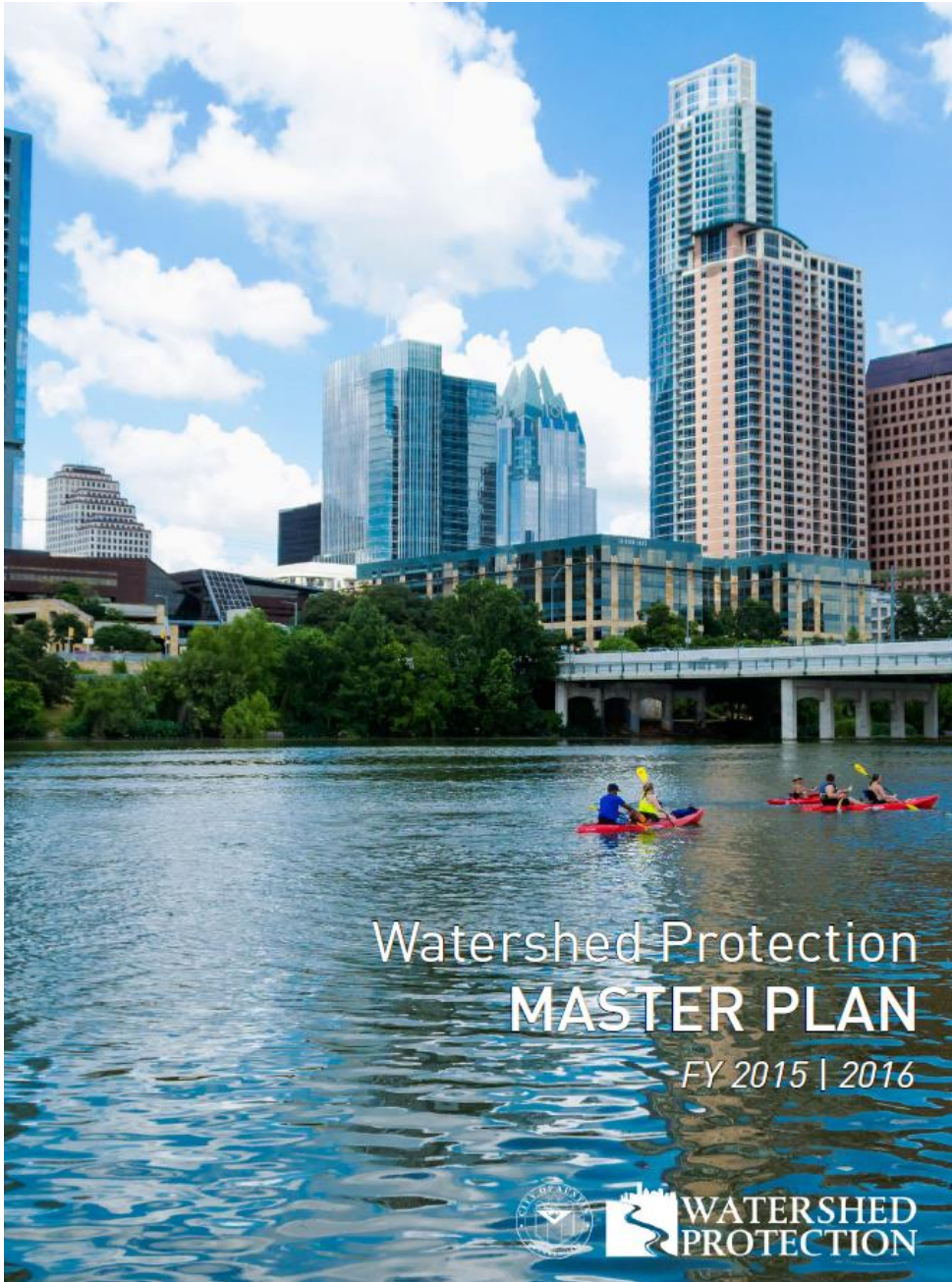
Helps explain WPD's work and priorities to staff, City executives, policymakers, and Austin community





## Why are we updating the plan?

- *Watershed Protection Master Plan* was originally adopted by City Council in 2001
- The previous planning effort did not prioritize gathering input from the full diversity of Austin's residents
- Revisions have been ad-hoc and focused on updates to technical information without public input
- The plan does not address major challenges like climate change, population growth, and racial inequities
- The plan does not sufficiently capture the knowledge and experience we have gained over the last 20 years
- The plan does not reflect the findings and recommendations of other City plans
- The plan does not set time-specific targets or objectives to demonstrate we are making measurable progress



# Goals for Rain to River Update

## REFLECT COMMUNITY VALUES

- Reflect goals, priorities, knowledge, and experience of community, staff, and stakeholders

## INCORPORATE EQUITY AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

- Advance racial equity in all department operations, resulting in equitable outcomes for all Austinites
- Incorporate climate adaptation to increase community's resilience to impacts of climate change
- Focus on groups most vulnerable to watershed impacts in terms of both exposure and ability to recover

## ACCESSIBLE & INFORMATIVE

- Be accessible and informative to a broad audience, including staff, City executives, policymakers, and the Austin community





# Engagement Approach

## RESPECTFUL TO PARTICIPANTS

- Make it easy and enjoyable to contribute input
- Be transparent about how feedback is being used; respect participants by only seeking feedback when it will inform a decision
- Utilize the most appropriate strategies and tools for specific groups or topics
- Use an iterative process; check in about what we've heard

## ADAPTIVE PROCESS

- Define success metrics for engagement, track performance, and commit to continuing engagement until we have met the metrics for success
- Adapt to potential limitations on engagement strategies due to COVID-19
- Coordinate and collaborate with other organizations on engagement efforts when possible

## FOCUSED ON RELATIONSHIPS

- Build relationships and trust with entities, leaders, and individuals in historically under-served groups and groups impacted by negative watershed outcomes
- Create systems to gather input from historically under-served communities that can be used beyond this engagement process



# Priority Stakeholders

Prioritize the following groups:

- **Under-served groups.** Residents who have been systematically marginalized from or denied a full opportunity to participate in past planning and decision-making processes and/or who are more likely to experience negative quality of life outcomes
- **Impacted groups.** Residents who have experienced or are at an increased risk of experiencing impacts of negative watershed outcomes (flooding, erosion, water pollution)
- **Organizations with relevant expertise.** Organizations that work on environmental, community health, or safety issues and who bring environmental and/or technical and policy expertise

And reach representative sample of the Austin community





# Broad Community Engagement

- Launched **RaintoRiverATX.com**
- Created a **Community Vision Survey** for people to share their experiences with natural spaces, waterways, and drainage infrastructure
- Advertised the survey using **yard signs** at community gathering spaces and **postcards** mailed to structures within the 100-year floodplain or within 50 feet of a local flood report
- Attended **community events**, including Earth Day, Rainbow on the Creek, Juneteenth, and Back to School Bash
- Reached out to over 120 different priority stakeholder organizations to make new connections and **build relationships**





# Rain to River

## A Strategic Plan to Protect Austin's Creeks and Communities

Each time rain falls on our city, it flows through a vast network of built and natural infrastructure and into our creeks, lakes, springs, and the Colorado River. Rain feeds the beautiful places that make Austin special—places where we can spend time with friends and family, explore nature, cool off, and relax. But rain can also pick up pollutants, erode creek banks, and flood homes and businesses.

### What is Rain to River?

Rain to River is a strategic plan that will guide the work of the Watershed Protection Department for the next 10 years. Our department will use this plan to set goals, prioritize our work, and guide our decision making to tackle urgent challenges such as climate change and racial inequities. The plan will update and replace the current Watershed Protection Strategic Plan. We need your help to draft the plan!





Community Vision Survey

Watershed Problems

Favorite Places

Ideas and Suggestions

Recent Comments

Get Involved

socialpinpoint

## Share your vision for Austin's creeks and communities!

### Take the Rain to River Community Vision Survey!

Rain that falls all over the city flows through a network of built and natural infrastructure to our creeks, lakes, springs, and the Colorado River. Rain feeds the places that make Austin special. But rain can also pick up pollutants, erode creek banks, and flood homes, roads, and businesses. The City of Austin is creating a strategic plan to protect Austin's ecosystems, creeks, and communities, and we want to hear from you!

Your input will help prioritize the Watershed Protection Department's work and guide decision making to tackle urgent challenges. We'll use this information to develop goals and explore the community's vision for how to embed equity and climate change at the core of Watershed Protection's work.

Visit [RaintoRiverATX.com](http://RaintoRiverATX.com) to learn more.

## Community Vision Survey

The map displays various locations in Austin with feedback points. Three callout boxes are visible:

- Top Callout:** "Lots of trash accumulates along the banks, especially after it rains. It would be great if the city organized more volunteer events to clean up the water. Just a couple of times a year isn't enough." (7 months ago, 2 agrees)
- Middle Callout:** "I used to take my dog to swim in Lady Bird Lake but now am fearful that he will become sick or die from harmful algae." (8 months ago, 5 agrees)
- Right Callout:** "I love this park so much, the hiking, the river. It feels so alive and natural compared to other areas of the river and the city." (8 months ago, 3 agrees)

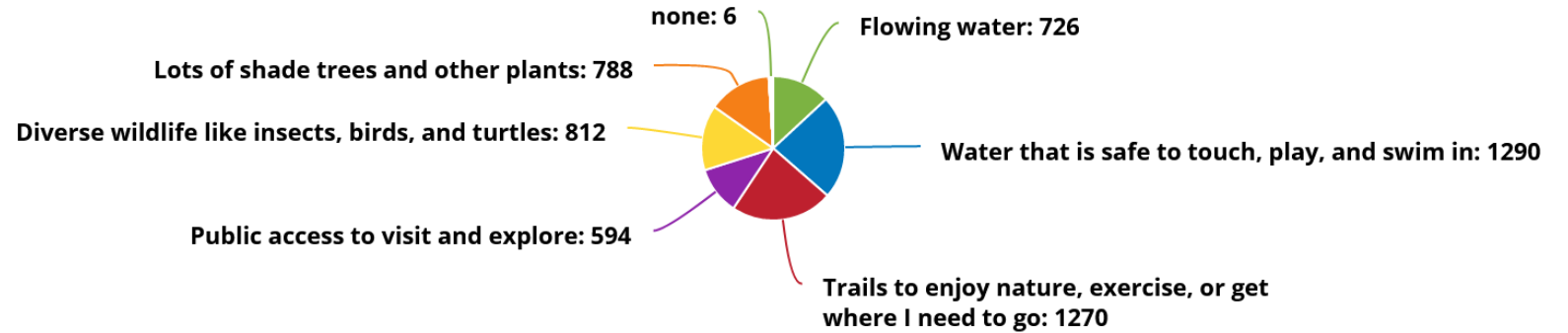
Legend:

- Favorite Place
- Watershed Problem
- Idea or Suggestion

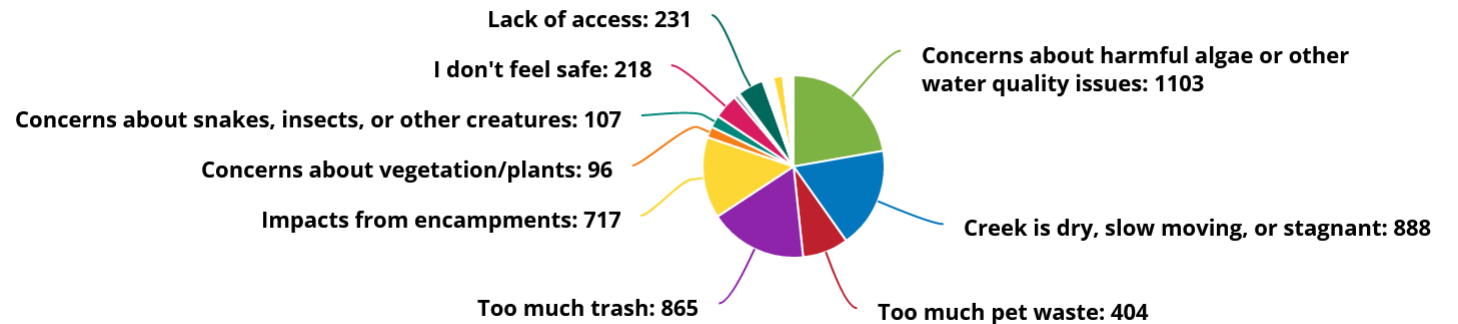


# Community Vision Survey

What do you value most about Austin's creeks, lakes, and natural spaces?



Does anything keep you from visiting or decrease your enjoyment of Austin's creeks, lakes, and natural spaces?



All results are preliminary. Survey is open through 3/31.









# Focused Engagement to Reach Priority Stakeholders

- Worked with **MEASURE**, a local black-owned nonprofit, to conduct five compensated focus groups designed by and centered on historically-excluded communities
- Conducted additional **focus groups** with organizations like Austin Youth River Watch and the Austin Youth Climate Equity Council
- Hired **community ambassadors** – a group of paid community members who gathered stories and perspectives from racially and economically diverse communities
- Launched **mini-grants** for partner organizations that can help further our goals for community engagement and representation
- Launched a **survey for community organizations** that will be supplemented with additional interviews





## THE IMPACTS OF FLOODING, POLLUTION, & EROSION ON AUSTIN COMMUNITIES

NOVEMBER 2022



### A LIVED-EXPERIENCE DATA BLACK PAPER

Deanna Cureton, MPH  
Janis Bookout

**MEASURE**  
Community Led. Data Driven.

# MEASURE Focus Groups

## Water quality themes

- Lack of awareness of how to report creek concerns to the city
- Strong desire for more public education and outreach
- It shouldn't take gentrification to fix problems
- West Austin is prioritized over East Austin
- Impacts of trash on neighborhoods and waterways
- Clean, flowing water is essential for the unhoused community

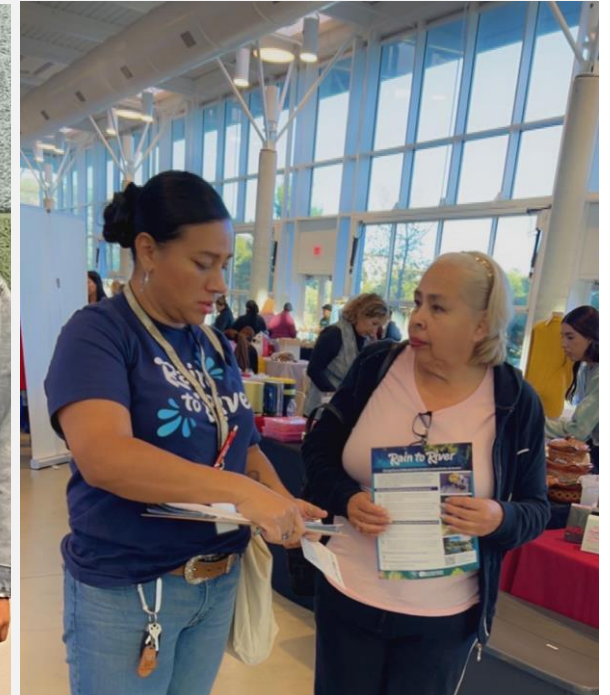
*"I don't know that the creek by me is polluted or not. How do I know that? What am I looking for? I always see it, that I know that I can report it to somebody and have them come and clean it and make it better for us? I had no idea."*





# Community Ambassador Program

CITY OF AUSTIN



WATERSHED PROTECTION DEPARTMENT





# Community Ambassadors

## Preliminary water quality themes from interviews

### Water Pollution and Trash

- People don't like to visit trails, natural spaces, and waterways because they are dirty and have a lot of trash and dog poop.
- People don't trust the cleanliness and safety of water.
- Concerns about toxic algae—both fears about the safety of dogs and humans as well as the look and smell.
- Concerns about trash from encampments and illegal dumping.
- Crowded trails and parks with more litter and pollution. Natural habitats have been lost as the city grows.

*“The creek by my house is in really bad shape. It would be nice to go through the creeks and not feel as if you'll catch some unknown disease due to the contents that's in it.”*





# Community Ambassadors

## Preliminary water quality themes from interviews

### Access to Waterways

- There is not enough easy and affordable access to waterways and natural spaces that feel inviting and safe.
- Concerns about safety along waterways, especially for women.
- Nearby parks and natural spaces are not well-known or well-maintained. Because of that, people have to drive farther to enjoy nature.
- Overall concern has been lack of time to get to these places and fully enjoy them. Responsibilities to jobs and families prohibit people from accessing these locations as much as they would like.

*“Our community I feel doesn’t really take advantage of the rivers and creeks. But, again it’s not really close for us to take advantage of this. If you don’t have a car this isn’t useful for you or your family.”*





# Community Ambassadors

## Preliminary water quality themes from interviews

### Inequitable Outcomes

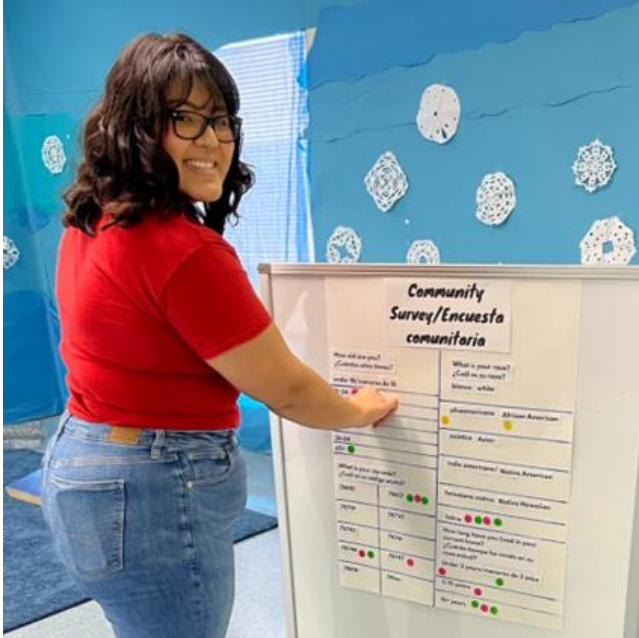
- There's a perception of a lack of racial and economic diversity in the people visiting local waterways such as Lady Bird Lake and Barton Springs. People feel out of place or like they don't belong.
- Waterways are not as beautiful or family-friendly on the eastside.
- In West Austin, the creeks and natural spaces are cleaner and better maintained, there are more community services, and things generally get addressed by city more quickly in comparison to East Austin.
- Inequities in the distribution of funding and resources

*"Like there's Mueller that's safe and clean, but like in Riverside there was so much pollution, so much littering you could see it in the water."*





# Partner Organization Mini-Grant Program



- Rain to River Partner Organizations:**
- African American Youth Harvest Foundation
  - Del Valle Community Coalition
  - Dove Springs Proud
  - Indigenous Cultures Institute
  - Queertopia
  - Red Salmon Arts





# How Do I Get Involved?

- Explore our website (**RainToRiverATX.com**) to learn more about the project and sign up for our mailing list
- For individuals, take the Community Vision Survey (5-10 minutes) and add to our map by **March 31**
- For organizations, take the Community Organization Survey by **April 30**





An aerial photograph of a river winding through a lush green forest. The water is a deep blue-green color. A person in a red kayak is visible in the lower right quadrant of the river. The trees are dense and vibrant green, with some bare branches visible in the foreground.

# Rain to River

Thank you!

[www.RaintoRiverATX.com](http://www.RaintoRiverATX.com)

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