

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Six major wildfires struck Travis County during the 2011 Labor Day weekend, consuming some 7,000 acres and 57 homes (City of Austin [date unknown]). That same weekend wildfires in nearby Bastrop County destroyed more than 1,700 homes and blackened more than 34,000 acres (Ridenour et al. 2012), making it the largest per-capita loss in the nation’s history.

Flames driven by high winds after a summer of drought swept through overgrown vegetation around communities and homes unprepared to resist wildfire. Today, those 2011 fires serve as a reminder to all central Texans that devastating wildfires will happen and, without proper planning, will be more catastrophic to our communities if we do not act to reduce our fire risks.

Those risks increase each day as we build homes, schools, and businesses in the wildland-urban interface -- the WUI -- those areas prone to wildfire. Although fire is a natural means of biological renewal, everyone who builds, lives, or manages property in this interface has an obligation to develop a fire-adapted community, a community where “human populations and infrastructure can withstand a wildfire without loss of life and property.” (Wildland Fire Leadership Council [WFLC] 2012).

Numerous Austin and Travis County groups have been working for years to improve wildfire resistance and resilience. There are currently 16 areas actively participating in the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) Firewise Communities program, 14 in the International Association of Fire Chiefs' (IAFC) “Ready, Set, Go!” program, and the Village of Sunset Valley, Lago Vista, and Jonestown have their own local-level Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). These communities are taking responsibility for their wildfire risk, and each one is aligning itself with the local fire adapted ecosystems.

Spurred on by the 2011 fires, Austin and Travis County officials formed the Joint Wildfire Task Force (JWTF) to take a more comprehensive approach to wildfire prevention, suppression, mitigation, and recovery. JWTF’s primary goal is to help all communities in the region become fire-adapted communities. JWTF’s role in guiding collaboration to develop this plan is discussed further in **Section 1.5** below and the participating members are listed in **Appendix A**.

JWTF members see this countywide Austin-Travis County CWPP as an important first step in enhancing cohesive and collaborative wildfire mitigation programs. The broader

community, working together with constituent local communities, can coordinate to make more effective progress in reducing wildfire-related risks for all our residents. Working together as like-minded, fire-adapted communities, we can accomplish our goal of protecting people, property, and place from wildfire.

## 1.1 BASIS FOR COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS

In 2002, wildfires burned more than seven million acres across the U.S. (NIFC 2002). In 2003, wildfires destroyed 3,710 homes in California (San Diego State University 2004). These losses illustrated that fire response and emergency management efforts alone were inadequate and contributed to passing the federal Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA). This legislation recognized that reducing a community's wildfire risk was a shared responsibility that required the participation of federal, state, and local government agencies, the private sector, and all citizens.

The HFRA encourages improved intergovernmental collaboration and increased public/private partnerships to reduce vegetative fuel and reduce risk in those communities most at risk from wildfire. Since risk reduction strategies are most effective when organized at the local level, the HFRA also encourages local communities to create their own strategies for wildfire mitigation through development of a CWPP. Through community-based wildfire planning it is possible to address the specific values and needs of a local community and to build awareness of wildfire preparedness and protection strategies.

Since the passage of the HFRA, CWPPs have been incorporated into multiple planning efforts at the federal, state, and local levels. In 2009, the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME) required the creation of a cohesive wildfire management strategy. As a result, the WFLC developed the National Cohesive Wildland Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy). The Cohesive Strategy seeks to find solutions to wildland fire management issues by focusing on three key areas: restoring and maintaining landscapes, creating Fire Adapted communities, and responding to wildfire with risk-based management decisions.

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan is a primary tool in achieving the goals of the Cohesive Strategy as it addresses the following HFRA requirements:

- ***Collaborative:*** A CWPP must be collaboratively developed by local and state government representatives, in consultation with federal agencies and other interested parties.
- ***Prioritize Fuel Reduction:*** A CWPP must identify and prioritize areas for hazardous fuel reduction and recommend the types and methods of treatment that will protect one or more at-risk communities and essential infrastructure. This provides critical information for implementing risk-based management decisions and restoring the landscape.
- ***Treatment of Structural Ignitability:*** A CWPP must recommend measures that homeowners and communities can take to reduce the ignitability of structures throughout the area addressed by the plan. This is a key step in becoming a Fire Adapted community.

Growing out of these basic requirements, a CWPP can take on a variety of configurations depending on the size and complexity of the community. The Austin-Travis County CWPP is a countywide CWPP that uses Texas A&M Forest Service’s (TFS) guidelines. As a regional CWPP, it provides risk analysis and data to develop community-level plans and a menu of effective risk reduction techniques for the central Texas fire environment. Local communities are encouraged to examine their fire risks on a finer scale using the tools provided in this plan. To facilitate that process, a template for the local CWPP and sources for the resources needed to develop community-level plans are provided in this overall CWPP. This Austin-Travis County CWPP provides tools and suggestions to aid communities as they scale the regional plan for local use.

Constituent communities currently participating in the NFPA’s Firewise Communities or the IAFC’s “Ready, Set, Go!” programs may individually, or in cooperation with adjacent communities, develop their own local-level CWPP. While many of the wildfire mitigation benefits are similar, adopting a CWPP and gaining recognition from local governing bodies and the TFS may help in seeking federal grants. These local plans will also assure that these communities’ efforts are consistent with the countywide cohesive strategy.

## 1.2 STATEMENT OF INTENT

Every day more homes and businesses spring up in and near the WUI. Understanding wildfire risk and reducing potential impact of wildfire on this development requires a proactive

approach that reaches across jurisdictional boundaries, public and private lands, and the diverse geographic regions of central Texas. The purpose of this Austin-Travis County CWPP is to expand the number of fire-adapted communities and the area of fire-resilient landscapes within the city and county in support of public safety and healthy ecosystems.

While the information and strategies provided in this CWPP are intended for use by professionals engaged in firefighting, land development and land management programs at the countywide scale, this plan also provides Travis County-specific tools and information for development of localized CWPPs. Local leaders and residents of smaller communities can prepare site-specific CWPPs in concert with countywide efforts. Residents working together can reduce their wildfire risk with local CWPPs they customize to their specific needs and site conditions.

### 1.3 GOALS

The Austin-Travis County CWPP is a shared planning effort of Travis County and the City of Austin. Its development was a multijurisdictional, collaborative process, with participation by governmental entities, local fire departments, and other community organizations and citizens. A plan for action, the Austin-Travis County CWPP is a living document that depends upon people and partnerships to succeed. Specific goals of this document are to:

- Provide for the life safety of residents and emergency personnel;
- Protect homes, business, and other infrastructure from wildfire;
- Promote and maintain healthy ecosystems and natural resources;
- Educate citizens about wildfire preparedness and prevention; and
- Support the development of local, site-specific CWPPs within Travis County and the City of Austin.

### 1.4 OBJECTIVES

In order to achieve these goals, the Austin-Travis County CWPP contains several broad objectives that include:

- Facilitating reduction of structural ignitability;
- Identifying areas to improve community wildfire preparedness;

- Enhancing inter-jurisdictional relationships;
- Facilitating improved risk assessments with localized fire behavior models;
- Developing wildfire mitigation strategies customized to the diverse ecological conditions throughout the county in support of fuel reduction projects;
- Identifying regulatory barriers to wildfire preparedness;
- Strengthening wildfire awareness programs,
- Developing a framework and tools for local, site-specific CWPPs.

## 1.5 COLLABORATION AND PLANNING PROCESS

This countywide CWPP was prepared under an Interlocal Cooperation Agreement between the City of Austin and Travis County. The City of Austin City Council and the Travis County Commissioners' Court jointly funded this effort and set up composition criteria for the JWTF, an RFP Committee, and a joint management team to oversee the CWPP preparation. The JWTF included city and county representatives from fire, law enforcement, emergency management, recreation, natural resource management, utilities, planning, and public works agencies. The JWTF collaboration also had representatives from other local entities, municipalities, and state agencies (see a full list in **Table 1** of **Appendix A**). The CWPP joint management team included one representative from the Austin Fire Department, one from the Austin Water Utility, and one from Travis County. This joint management team was responsible for making decisions and guiding completion of the final contents of the Austin-Travis County CWPP.

The fact that the Austin-Travis County CWPP is a planning document, rather than a set of regulations or codes, has been an important part of achieving consensus throughout the development process. Consensus is agreement to publicly support the regional plan with the understanding that detailed implementation will be determined based on a multi-disciplined review of location-specific conditions. This plan development process has generated general guidelines to be adopted by the Travis County Commissioners' Court and the City of Austin City Council and to be acknowledged by the Texas A&M Forest Service. The process for arriving at these general guides has included consideration of, and promotes adherence to, the various regulations and codes established within the overlapping jurisdictions governing activities in the planning area.

It's anticipated that many elements of this countywide plan will be appropriately scaled and replicated to generate numerous local-level CWPPs. Successful efforts to seek consensus rather than 100-percent agreement is key in defining broad perspectives that can be implemented in a holistic manner throughout an environment with numerous highly focused constraints (e.g., endangered species, watershed health, forest health). With respect to wildfire mitigation in particular, consensus-focused collaboration and cooperation can result in site-specific alterations that support both the special constraint and wildfire protection. As an example, strict enforcement of broadly applied rules to preserve an undisturbed conservation easement could prevent wildfire mitigation treatments around it. But implementing a fire-disruption strategy could reduce risk and benefit the conservation area being protected.

The process for developing the Austin-Travis County CWPP was comprised of three major components: stakeholder involvement, risk assessment refinement, and peer review. The first component reached out to the applicable jurisdictions, various stakeholder groups, and the public to gather input on community concerns and values. The second component developed enhanced tools for assessing wildfire risk in this portion of central Texas. The final component created Task Groups of subject matter experts from the JWTF member organizations to use their knowledge of local conditions in refining the various elements of the plan.

Understanding community concerns and priorities is critical to the development of a CWPP and its successful implementation. To that end, the remaining sections of this introductory chapter are focused on describing the community input process and the community values and concerns expressed.

## 1.6 STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

The collaborative effort used in forming the JWTF and initiating this CWPP planning process was only the beginning for addressing the HFRA requirement. Additional input from various levels of government, public and private entities, and the general public was collected through a Stakeholder Involvement process. The process for this planning effort included contacting stakeholders in three categories: Community, Expert, and Wildfire Prevention Stakeholders. Their input was used to identify both the Community Values and the Community Concerns introduced in this section. These values and concerns acted as guides in customizing typical wildfire mitigation efforts to this unique area and have been addressed throughout the applicable sections of the CWPP.

## 1.6.1 COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

To obtain public stakeholder involvement, a series of open meetings were scheduled in five different areas of the county: central, northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. These meetings were publicized on city and county websites, through television and print media, and email invitations sent to several hundred individuals representing local government, homeowners associations, neighborhood groups, civic organizations, fire departments, professional organizations, and environmental groups. Local newspapers and television stations covered news of the meetings along with the schedule.

The community meetings were held in the evening at the following locations in 2013:

- Travis County East Service Center–May 14, 15 and 16
- Travis County–May 20, 22 and 23
- Travis County West Service Center–May 28, 29 and 30
- Pflugerville Fire Department–June 4, 5 and 6
- North Lake Travis Fire and Rescue (Jonestown) –June 11, 12 and 13

A modified Nominal Group Technique (aka. Brainstorming) was used to manage the meetings and to ensure that all participants had fair opportunity to express their views. The Nominal Group Technique questions posed to each community meeting included: what are your major concerns in event of a wildfire and what community values do you think are at risk in event of a wildfire?

In addition to the public meetings, an online survey was available for those who could not attend any of the public meetings. The on-line survey asked the same questions presented at the community meetings and drew 125 responses. The values and concerns expressed during the Community Stakeholder Involvement process have been integrated into the summaries provided later in this section. Tabulations of the various responses are located in **Appendix A**.

## 1.6.2 EXPERT STAKEHOLDERS

Although the community collaboration provided insights and opinions from the general public, it was also necessary to obtain the expertise of professionals working in or managing the areas that would be most impacted by potential wildfire. To engage this group of stakeholders, a series of function-specific work group meetings were held. Both City of Austin and Travis

County employees and officials, and representatives from pertinent non-governmental organizations were invited to these work group sessions.



Figure 1. CWPP internal stakeholder meeting.

These meetings were also managed with a modified Nominal Group Technique with questions defined specifically for each work group. Participants provided direction to the planning effort and prioritized the responses.

The work groups and their function-specific Nominal Group Technique questions or statements included the following:

- Fire Suppression
  - Identify WUI concerns and issues
  - Identify Fire Risk Mapping Issues
- Environment/Land Management
  - Identify WUI concerns and issues
- Local Government Work
  - Identify WUI concerns and issues: Community, Political, Implementation
- Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP)
  - Identify WUI concerns and issues
  - Identify concerns unique to BCP
  - Provide suggestions for addressing those unique concerns
- Energy Providers

- Identify WUI concerns and issues
- Identify assets at risk of wildfire
- Law Enforcement
  - Identify WUI concerns and issues
  - Identify evacuation/public safety concerns

A written survey for each group was developed to distribute to individuals from the various agencies and departments unable attend the workshops. An additional written survey was developed and distributed to park managers throughout the county. The values and concerns expressed through this process have been integrated into the summaries provided later in this section. Tabulations of the various responses are located in **Appendix A**.

### 1.6.3 WILDFIRE PREVENTION STAKEHOLDERS

These are professionals engaged in implementing various mitigation programs (i.e., CWPPs, Firewise, Ready-Set-Go!) and are essential in providing input to the overall process due to their firefighting expertise, their interactions with the general public, and their previous wildfire mitigation work in the area. Their comprehensive perspectives, coupled with personal engagement with a variety of property owners, provide valuable feedback based on first-hand experience with engaging the general public and efforts to create fire-adapted communities.

The JWTF Task Groups provided subject matter experts who were invaluable to CWPP preparation and gave the consulting team considerable anecdotal information regarding the values and concerns expressed by the general public independent of the Community Stakeholder Involvement process. The input from the wildfire prevention professionals and JWTF Task Groups has also been integrated into the summaries provided in the remainder of this section.

### 1.6.4 COMMUNITY VALUES

Community values include elements deemed important and worthy of protection from wildfires. The community values identified in this section should be considered during risk assessment and mitigation planning. The community values identified during the stakeholder involvement process are categorized into natural, social, and cultural groups. Items discussed below are not an exhaustive or ranked list of community values that could be affected by wildfire

in Travis County but those that were frequently mentioned in the stakeholder involvement process.

Natural community values include general ecological ones as well as specific locations and features. Natural community values within Travis County and the City of Austin include:

- Ecological Conditions – Features that are part of healthy ecosystems, including clean water, clean air, native wildlife species and their habitats, healthy and diverse vegetative communities.
- Parks and Open Spaces – These can range from playing fields to highly maintained environments to relatively natural landscapes. In addition to parklands managed by Travis County and the City of Austin (**Figure 2**), parks and open spaces are managed and maintained throughout the county by a variety of entities including municipalities, environmental organizations (e.g., Travis Audubon) and neighborhoods.
- Preserves – These are unique types of open space with additional restrictions depending on the type of asset being preserved. Preserves typically protect essential endangered species habitat, unique natural features such as caves, crucial watersheds or streams, or a specific type of ecosystem. The city and county jointly manage the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan, which is a 30-year regional permit that allows for incidental take of endangered species as a result of development in exchange for the creation of a preserve system for eight protected species as well as 27 other at-risk species. The Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) is composed of 152 properties totaling 30,444 acres with 19 different managing agencies (Travis County and City of Austin 2012). The City of Austin also manages Water Quality Protection lands. These water quality management areas include conservation easements and directly managed natural areas that comprise 40,000 acres in western Travis and northern Hays Counties.
- State Parks – The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department oversees 113 state parks, historic sites and natural areas throughout the state. The 726-acre McKinney Falls State Park is the only state park in Travis County (**Figure 2**).
- National Wildlife Refuges – The National Wildlife Refuge system is a national network of lands for the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats managed by the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service (USFWS). The Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge consists of approximately 23,000 acres located in Burnet, Travis, and Williamson Counties with the primary purpose of protecting the nesting habitat of the endangered golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo (**Figure 2**).

Social community values include special needs populations and community infrastructure.

- Schools, Libraries, and Educational Institutions – There are 174 public, private, and charter schools for kindergarten through high school and 15 school districts in Travis County (Texas Education Agency 2012; Texas Private School Accreditation Commission 2012). Travis County is also home to six major universities and colleges including the University of Texas at Austin and Austin Community College, two of the largest in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education 2012).
- Hospitals, Nursing Homes, Day Care, and Healthcare Facilities – According to the Texas Department of State Health Services (2012), there are 20 acute care and psychiatric hospitals in Travis County, and 29 nursing homes (Department of Aging and Disability Services 2012).
- Critical Infrastructure – Critical infrastructure is generally defined as resources that are essential for the functioning of a society and its economy. These resources commonly include roads, airports, bridges, power plants, water/wastewater treatment plants, utility lines (electric, water, phone, cable, gas, etc.), water supply (lakes, rivers, dams), emergency services (police, fire, rescue), and communications facilities. Camp Mabry, the state headquarters for the Texas National Guard, is an example of critical infrastructure meeting several of these criteria.

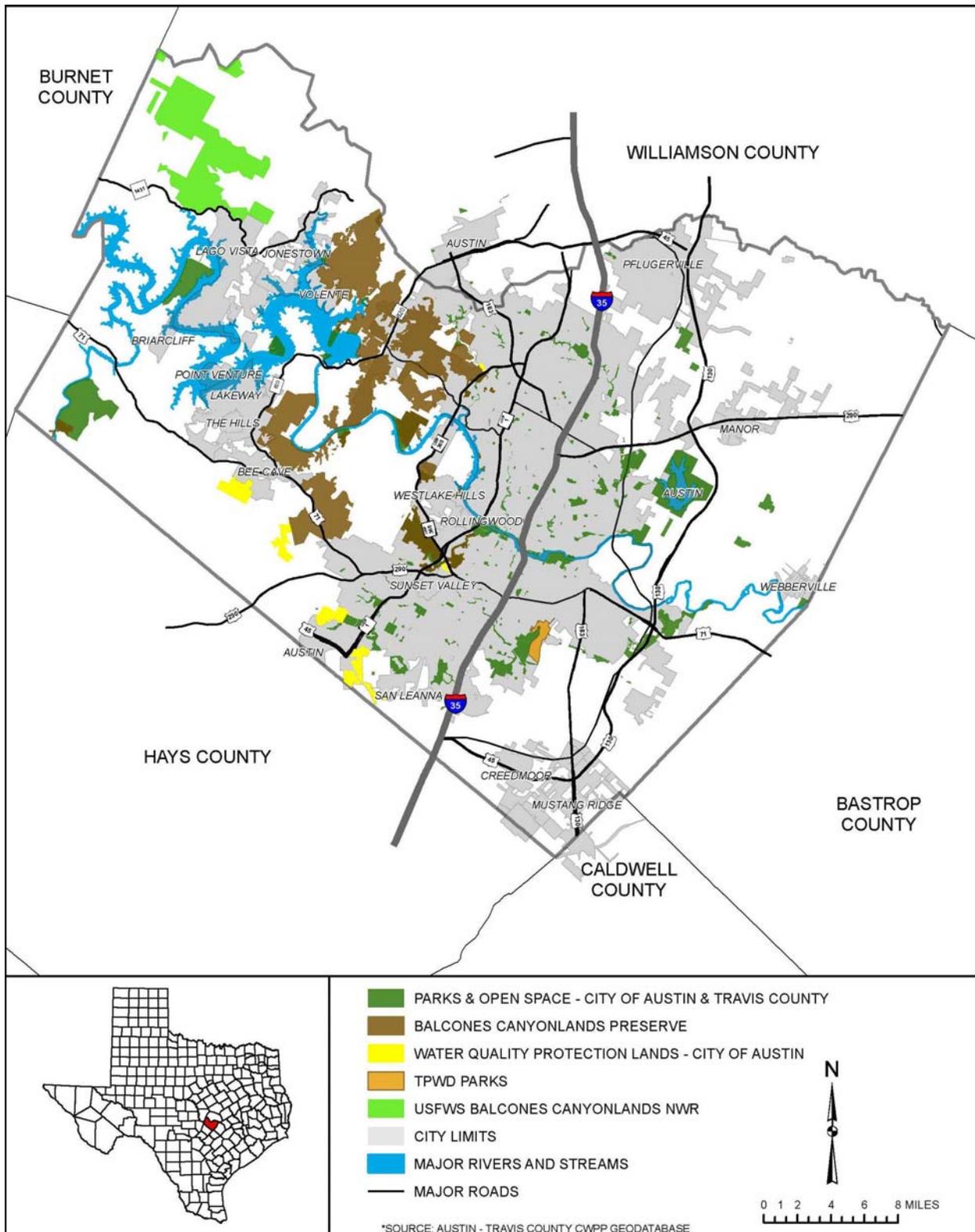


Figure 2. Parks, open spaces and preserves within the Austin-Travis County CWPP planning area.

Cultural community values are “those tangible and intangible aspects of cultural systems, both living and dead, that are valued by or representative of a given culture or that contain information about a culture...” (National Park Service 1998). Cultural community values include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Archeological and Natural Landmark Sites - Numerous archeological assets from Native American sites to historic buildings, historical districts, and homesteads exist throughout Travis County. Also included are the heritage trees and other natural features that are part of the historic perspective and the sense of place experienced by the generations of Texans.
- Churches and Cemeteries - Most communities throughout the planning area have one or more churches and cemeteries that reflect cultural aspects of inhabitants from early immigrants to modern residents.
- Community Event and Activity Centers - Additional cultural community values are reflected in event-oriented settings such as the local music and arts scene, a multiplicity of annual festivals, a growing film industry, the recent Circuit of the Americas F-1 Track, and other genres too numerous to list here.
- Local Establishments – Locally owned eateries, dancehalls, and markets illustrate the value placed on a community’s local identity. A special element identified as a high value in many communities is the local barbeque establishments that have been, or are on their way to being, a generational legacy.
- Commercial and Governmental Facilities - A vital component of this culture is the mix of private business and government employment centers providing financial opportunity for local families. From the high-tech industry to the concentration of state functions around the Capitol to agribusiness concerns, the community culture at large is being shaped by opportunities to work and live in an area with an eye for sustainable prosperity and a secure economic legacy.

Austin and Travis County are home to and employment centers for a diverse population of engaged citizens living active lives connected to the natural, social, and cultural values within and around the city, county and central Texas. They make up constituent communities who are interested in taking proactive steps to protect their valued environments. A growing number of these local communities are making the choice to become fire adapted by implementing plans to mitigate risk and reduce the impacts of wildfire. The communities currently participating in the

“Ready, Set, Go!” and Firewise Communities programs, or utilizing a local-level CWPP are listed in **Table 2** found in **Section 2.4**.

### 1.6.5 COMMUNITY CONCERNS

The Stakeholder Involvement process yielded numerous community concerns as identified by participating community, expert, and wildfire prevention professional stakeholders. The myriad and diverse concerns expressed are summarized in the following section and grouped within related themes. Tabular summaries of many of the survey and stakeholder meeting inputs are included in **Appendix A**.

The order of these thematic groups is intended to be an aid in recognizing the shared relationships between the concerns and does not necessarily reflect any particular priority among them. The following summaries also indicate which aspects of the mitigation-related concerns are addressed in detail within this CWPP and which ones are deferred to wildfire professionals and managers with subject matter expertise and authority to cover the non-mitigation related concerns. **Section 6** of this CWPP includes recommendations to ensure that the appropriate working group or subcommittee of the JWTF takes the latter into consideration.

#### Theme Number One – Wildfire Education

The concern for improving the public’s knowledge regarding wildfire was broad based. Wildfire prevention professionals sponsoring various wildfire education programs would like to see greater attendance. Residents who are becoming better educated regarding wildfire mitigation want to see continued expansion of wildfire education programs. The ever-expanding WUI, with the associated migration of urban residents out to suburban neighborhoods closer to wildland, increases the need for expanding public wildfire education programs. This topic is addressed extensively in **Sections 5.1 and 6.2.1** of this CWPP.

#### Theme Number Two – The Other Side of the Fence

The perception of a wildfire hazard on an adjacent property is a source of concern for many residents, particularly those in WUI communities. Whether it’s the next-door neighbor or the green belt behind their lot, looking to the other side of the fence is often looking past the best opportunity to protect their own structure. Several sections of this CWPP address this concern with information about the behavior of wildfire and the most effective means for protecting people and structures from wildfire.

The basic forms of structural ignition risk from wildfire are radiant heat, spot ignition due to embers, and conductive or direct flame impingement. Radiant ignition risk is based on the intensity of the wildfire causing the structure materials to ignite. Spot ignition risk is related to embers from the wildfire blown into another area where they can ignite fine fuels, like tree litter trapped in rain gutters, and subsequently the entire structure. Conductive ignition is triggered by direct flame impingement and can be caused by low-intensity fires adjacent to the structure.



Figure 3. HIZ results after 2011 Lake Possum Kingdom fire.  
(Photo courtesy of Justice Jones)

All of these risks are most effectively and efficiently mitigated by treatments within the Home Ignition Zone (HIZ). The HIZ, a defined buffer zone surrounding a house, forms a defensible space wherein treatment of fuels reduces the encroachment opportunity of radiant heat from an active fire. Taking appropriate steps to reduce the ignitability of the structure and nearby improvements can dramatically improve resistance to ignition from embers borne aloft by winds passing over fires burning farther away. **Section 5.3** provides detailed information regarding the HIZ.

While both sides of the fence represent some level of risk to the other, the perception that the other side needs to be altered to protect the perceiver's side is not always valid. With respect to an adjacent wildland, the presence of human activity on the perceiver's side of the fence often represents a greater risk to the wildland because the majority of wildfires are started by human-related activities (see **Table 9**, in **Section 3.1.2.3**). Coordinated efforts by property owners on both sides of the fence can provide the best reduction in wildfire risk.

Helping residents recognize that the best place to start wildfire protection is on their own property is a primary theme in this CWPP. Wildfires will happen and the most basic component of a fire-adapted community is properly prepared properties in the WUI. The Ready-Set-Go! (RSG) program engages local fire departments with their communities and the Firewise

Community program facilitates homeowner action to reduce risk from wildfire. Both of these programs have been well received and many participants in several of the stakeholder groups encouraged greater dissemination of these programs' principles. This countywide CWPP provides numerous tools to assist local-level communities in developing local-level CWPPs and becoming fire adapted in compliance with HFRA.

Theme Number Three – Improved Community Involvement. Wildfires are everybody's fight.

There is concern over apathy toward wildfire on many levels. Many participants had their own motivations for being engaged in the CWPP stakeholder involvement processes, but some also acknowledged concern that their neighbors may have little interest. The 2011 wildfires damaged several communities and did much to elevate the topic in communities both affected and not. The JWTF was formed in part to better address the communities impacted by wildfire and to capitalize on engaging more aware constituents. One local wildfire fighting professional put it well when he stated, "Wildfires are everybody's fight." This CWPP includes information about several public outreach programs currently underway and it also includes recommendations for local fire professionals to promote and encourage the development of local-level CWPPs in areas with the greatest wildfire risk.

Theme Number Four – Life, Safety, and Property Damage

The danger wildfires present to life and property are significant concerns for both the general public and the subject matter experts. Two of the primary goals of the CWPP are specifically focused on protection for residents, emergency personnel, and constructed improvements. The mitigation strategies promoted in this plan will enhance safety by reducing the risk of wildfire ignition or expansion and by mitigating many of the impacts that may occur. Localized enhancements of structure protection and responder access are potential outcomes of local-level CWPP development and invaluable for protecting life and property. The mitigation strategies and response recommendations presented in this CWPP will both contribute to improved safety for people and property improvements.

Theme Number Five – Catastrophic Habitat Loss

Consideration of endangered species is one of the natural community values expressed by stakeholders and a majority of federally protected species habitat in Travis County is specifically threatened by wildfire. Wildfire can cause catastrophic habitat loss and, while wildfire

can be a part of the natural cycle within an ecosystem, statistics show that wildfires are started less frequently by natural causes than by man. Efforts to conserve habitat as development occurs must be complemented with efforts to reduce the risk of wildfire ignition and spread throughout the WUI.

The health of area vegetation communities and watersheds has often supported a management strategy of little intervention to natural succession and restoration; however, within the WUI, some mitigation strategies may be appropriate to appreciably reduce risk to the conservation area as a whole. Numerous land management programs actively maintain a variety of preserves across the planning area and they will be better equipped to fulfill their missions as the cohesive mitigation strategies recommended in this CWPP are collaboratively implemented.

#### Theme Number Six – Fuels Management Implications

The reduction of fuels available to wildfires is a key to controlling an approaching wildfire and fuel reduction is a critical measure that can be implemented efficiently and effectively within the WUI. However, fuel reduction programs can produce a lot of biomass that must be disposed of properly, thus limiting the amount of area that can be treated in a particular location or timeframe. Another limiting factor is property ownership and who is ultimately responsible for the fuel reduction strategy implementation. As stated in Theme Number Two, implementing fuel management strategies within the HIZ setting is the most efficient and effective option because fuels are removed closer to the structure being protected. Fuel reduction and management strategies are invaluable to the success of wildfire preparedness and are addressed in this CWPP.

#### Theme Number Seven – Native Plants and Landscaping

Native plants and landscape planting also arose as concerns regarding wildfire mitigation. Some participants expressed concern over the flammability of various native and non-native plant species. Others were looking for fire-adapted landscape architects or guidance on xeriscaping as a form of mitigation. Still others were concerned that sound ecological principles be the focus of mitigation and prevention strategies. This CWPP addresses these topics as well as others such as the effects of extreme drought on plants.

### Theme Number Eight – Wildfire Response Capabilities

Stakeholders identified numerous concerns over firefighting response capabilities, which are covered in a variety of sections within this CWPP. Wildfire response concerns such as access for and safety of firefighters and protection of critical infrastructure are covered extensively. Other aspects of wildfire response are discussed broadly as a reference, with the detailed planning left to emergency services providers and managers focused on wildfire response and suppression. These concerns include the sufficiency of pre-response planning/coordination, levels of personnel, firefighting apparatus, water, funding, resource staging to improve response time, ingress and egress for responders and the public, and technologies for early detection.

### Theme Number Nine – Evacuation

Evacuation-related concerns, like the response capability concerns mentioned in Theme Eight, are addressed in varying levels of detail within this CWPP. The concern over neighborhoods with a single point of access is covered extensively with respect to the land development codes and other regulations that permit them. The more generally discussed concerns include the need for evacuation planning, evacuation traffic and neighborhood security, and communications for advance warning, preparation, where to go, and when to return.

### Theme Number 10 – Communications

This CWPP has a number of recommendations for review and assessment of various communication methods related to wildfire mitigation and response. Wildfire danger notification, keeping the public informed (before, during, and after) about wildfires, notices regarding evacuation and sheltering, reverse 9-1-1, and interoperability of radio communications.

### Theme Number 11 – Pre-wildfire Planning and Post-wildfire Concerns

Another way to mitigate wildfire risks to the safety of people and property is planning for pre- and post-wildfire actions. Wildfire pre-plans help bridge the gap between mitigation efforts and how they can be integrated or leveraged into suppression plans. Community protection includes, for instance, development of action plans for electric utility providers to de-energize lines in an active fire area and restore them after the danger has passed. The development of

local-level CWPPs specifically requires collaboration with utility providers in order to address this concern.

#### Theme Number 12 – Planning and Development Concerns

A number of concerns related to current development practices were identified. The topography in some county areas creates extreme challenges for providing two routes for access and egress for numerous communities and developable sites. Limiting access to a single route may create unacceptable risks depending on the configuration of roads and the number of residents affected. Additional impacts include access for emergency responders and the need for sheltering within a development. These are problems for both existing and new developments and retrofitting for fire preparedness is not always an option. The relatively weak powers granted to Texas counties complicate the resolution of this community concern. This is an ongoing concern and the subject of recommendations in this CWPP.

#### Theme Number 13 – Conflicting Rules and Regulations

The various powers granted to governmental jurisdictions introduce a number of conflicts that create wildfire mitigation implementation concerns. Each jurisdiction has its own functions to regulate and may, with uncompromising enforcement, diminish the overall fire adaptability possible for a local community. This CWPP promotes holistic thinking through collaborative dialog.

Conflicts for implementing wildfire mitigation strategies can occur at numerous levels. For example, a Home Owners Association (HOA) implementing its Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions (CCR) requiring wooden privacy fences may inadvertently provide horizontal and/or vertical continuity between a wildfire and a structure. A protective vegetative buffer around a Critical Environmental Feature (CEF) may provide continuity during a wildfire. Land managed for the protection and conservation of federally protected species creates unique challenges to wildfire mitigation in the WUI. However, each of these examples provides a valuable opportunity for inter-jurisdictional collaboration in developing regionally specific wildfire mitigation strategies that allow for advancement of each respective entity's mission. Ultimately, there are a number of options for dealing with regulatory conflict such as variances, rule changes to better accommodate and/or require fire-adapted community principles, and pursuit of legislation to

amend codes as needed to eliminate the conflict. This topic receives a broad discussion under **Section 2.8.**

#### Theme Number 14 – Watershed Health and Water Quality

Watershed health and water quality are significant concerns throughout the plan area and finding the right balance between wildfire mitigation and watershed protection is critical. The selection of a wildfire mitigation strategy and the location for application, including erosion control during implementation, must be guided by holistic input from various jurisdictions governing an area so that appropriate treatments can reduce the impacts on water quality while reducing risk from the devastating impacts of a watershed denuded by fire. The recommendations and tools provided in this regional plan consistently require collaboration with the subject matter experts governing watershed health and water quality in the plan area.

In summary, this CWPP addresses each of these community concerns in the following sections and appendices with extensive coverage of those centered on wildfire protection. This CWPP briefly discusses other concerns and defers their ultimate resolution to sources related to the subject matter. Community values and concerns voiced during the Stakeholder Involvement process helped develop and adapt many of this CWPP's wildfire-mitigation principles. These principles will develop Austin and Travis County fire-adapted communities with cohesive, flexible strategies that can adapt to our area's changing circumstances and priorities.