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## *Issues and Actions: Conservation Easements*

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The Hill Country is blessed with rich natural heritage. For many landowners, land is much more than a financial asset; it is their legacy and their family history. Unfortunately, passing on the family farm or ranch, once a time-honored Texas tradition, is becoming less and less feasible due to many personal and financial issues, including the cost of land management and the pressures of encroaching development.

Conservation easements are one of the most flexible and effective means to protect private property while providing tax relief. A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement that ensures a property will be forever managed according to the landowner's wishes. Each individual agreement is unique to the special qualities of the land and the conservation goals of the landowner.

Many rights come with owning property, including the rights to manage resources, change use, subdivide or develop. With a conservation easement, a landowner limits one or more of these rights. For example, a landowner donating a conservation easement could choose to limit the right to develop a property, but keep the rights to build a house, raise cattle and grow crops. The landowner may continue his or her current use of the property, provided the resources the conservation easement is intended to protect are sustained.

Often easements are donated by the landowner who then enjoys considerable tax relief. However with public funding sources there can be far more opportunities for significant land conservation in the Hill Country. The Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program, created in 2005 by the Texas Legislature is a PDR program (purchase of development rights) that pays property owners who volunteer to conserve their land but unfortunately this program has never been funded. Federal funds do exist and are used effectively in other parts of the county but local matching



**Hill Country Alliance** is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country.

dollars are necessary to take advantage of these kinds of programs.

Cities and counties in central Texas including Austin, San Antonio, Hays County, Bexar County and Travis County have passed bond elections to generate public funding to preserve natural areas and protect water supply. Contact HCA for more information about these opportunities and how to get involved in these types of local initiatives.

The Texas Land Trust Council offers an excellent 40 page handbook covering everything from the financials, legal aspects and working examples of conservation easements.

### **Land Trusts working in this area:**

The Nature Conservancy ([nature.org](http://nature.org))  
Texas Land Conservancy ([texaslandconservancy.org](http://texaslandconservancy.org))  
Hill Country Conservancy ([hillcountryconservancy.org](http://hillcountryconservancy.org))  
Hill Country Land Trust ([hillcountrylandtrust.org](http://hillcountrylandtrust.org))  
Cibolo Conservancy ([cibolo.org](http://cibolo.org))