



Local leaders
Regional challenges
Real solutions
Lasting relationships

2023-2025 Participant Bios – Alphabetical by County

Note: Some titles may have changed as public servants leave office or relocate. Titles as listed were accurate at the time of participation in Leadership Institute programming

Bandera County

Stan Farmer, Former City Administrator - Bandera

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Over the course of twenty-two years, Stan has served as a City Manager in five cities spanning the states of North Carolina and Texas. In each role, he has spearheaded initiatives to enhance community development, infrastructure, and public services. Stan received a Master of Public Administration from Appalachian State University and a Master of Public Affairs from the esteemed LBJ School of Public Policy at the University of Texas at Austin. Prior to his work in local government, he served in the United States Marine Corps, both stateside and in Okinawa, Japan.

Rebeca Gibson, Mayor – Bandera

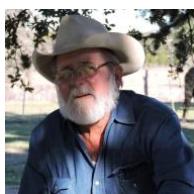
2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



In November 2022, Rebeca Gibson was elected Mayor of Bandera during her fourth consecutive term on the Bandera City Council. An avid collaborator, Gibson is inspired by multi-agency cooperation and tapping into community intellectual resources to find effective solutions. Gibson works as a realtor with Hunt Real Estate, federal navigator for CentroMed, and project manager for Vaccinate Bandera. She received her BA from University of Houston and currently serves on the Board of Directors for both the Bandera County River Authority & Groundwater District and Hill Country Alliance.

Jack Moseley, Commissioner Precinct 3 - Bandera County

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Jack Moseley has served as Bandera County Commissioner for Precinct 3 for more than seven years. Prior to being elected County Commissioner, Moseley is proud to have served the county for 13 years as an employee of the Bandera County Road & Bridge Department. He also has past experience as the county liaison to the Bandera County Historical Committee and service in multiple citizen groups and voluntary county committees. Born and raised in Bandera County, Commissioner Moseley is concerned by growth-related challenges such as increased subdivision development to the County's groundwater.

Jada Jo Smith, Board Member – Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Jada Jo Smith serves as Bandera County's Precinct 4 Board of Directors for BCRAGD. Smith is the Broker/Owner of Orange Blossom Real Estate and has over 18 years in the real estate, abstract title, mineral title and land stewardship practices. Jada grew up on Orange Blossom Farm in Carrizo Springs, where her parents Bay & JoAnn Laxson helped spearhead organic farming in the State of Texas. Jada grew up attending Wintergarden Groundwater District meetings with her dad, Bay, who served on the Board of Directors.

From 2017-2018, she worked with Sky Lewey and the Nueces River Authority to teach kids about watersheds and pollution. When not showing property or closing real estate contracts, Jada homeschools her daughter Viola, teaches yoga and enjoys family time in nature or on mom and dad's farm.

Dieter Werner, County Engineer – Bandera

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



In addition to currently serving the residents of Bandera County as their County Engineer and having previously served the residents of the City of Kerrville as Director of Engineering and Planning, Dieter established Four Winds Engineering, LLC in April 2010 and provides civil engineering design and consulting services in the private sector. Dieter is a Certified Floodplain Manager, and LID Certified for Low Impact Development design. He also has a passion for rainwater harvesting as a component of responsible development.

Blanco County

Candy Cargill, Mayor - Blanco

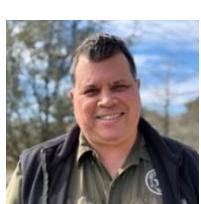
2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Candy Cargill sits on the Blanco City Council and is the owner of the oldest company in Blanco County - Hill Country Real Estate - founded by her mother in the early 1970's. After a career in the sports industry, she moved back home and went to work at Hill Country Real Estate in 1986. She has been involved with numerous civic organizations through the years and is currently the Blanco Coordinator for Wreaths Across America and Vice President of the Blanco Historic Cemetery Association. Candy is a self-taught water nerd and a fierce protector of the Hill Country way of life.

Warren Escovy, City Administrator – Blanco

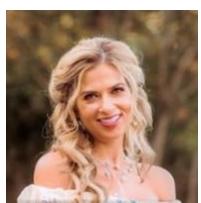
2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Warren is a City Administrator with over 25 years of public and private sector development experience. Public engagement is key to finding solutions to many of the problems we face today from environmental, fiscal, and infrastructure issues. Water is the key issue facing most cities and towns in the Texas Hill Country and through his involvement in the Leadership institute he hopes to bring back some possible solutions to his community. He stepped into his current role in Blanco in 2022 after spending more than six years working for the City of Sealy in a variety of roles including City Manager. He lives with his wife and dog in the Blanco area.

Stephanie Fisher, Mayor – Johnson City

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Stephanie Fisher is the mayor of Johnson City, balancing public service with raising her five children and supporting her husband, the head of a law enforcement agency. A sixth-generation Texan and fifth-generation rancher, Stephanie attended Tarleton State University before serving as a member of the U.S. Army Family Crisis Response Team, where she supported military families in the hours after being notified that their servicemember had been killed in action. She is the Chairwoman of the Hill Country 100 Club, committed to supporting first responders, and contributes to the Johnson City Community Education Foundation as a board member. In addition to her public service, Stephanie manages

her family's expansive ranch and is involved in her church and in the Johnson City Independent School District.

Sam Richardson, City Councilmember– Johnson City

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Sam Richardson is a Councilman for the City of Johnson City. Since before stepping into his role in government, he has served the community with the Johnson City Volunteer Fire Department as a Firefighter and EMT, where he received additional credentials as a wildland firefighter and swiftwater rescue swimmer. Sam received Bachelor's degrees from Tarleton State University in both Economics and Agri-Business, before moving to College Station, where he attended courses at Texas A&M in the Masters of Agribusiness Program and continued his education at Tarleton in their Masters of Management and Leadership program. In 2020 he founded Richardson Apparatus, a fire equipment supply company focused on serving first responders in the State of Texas by connecting them with industry leaders from across the globe.

Laura Swinson, City Councilmember – Blanco

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Laura Swinson serves as a councilmember in Blanco. She aims to maintain Blanco's small-town character while managing growth and hopes to find sustainable solutions to ensure Blanco's future water supply. Laura is passionate about walkability and alternative transportation, and she volunteers for the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky. Outside of her service as a councilmember, she works as a software developer and has previously served as a planning and zoning commissioner for the City of Blanco.

Teresa Taylor-Babb, City Councilmember - Johnson City

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Born in West Texas and raised in Johnson City, Teresa has her roots deep in the Texas Hill Country. After spending 17 years as a Law Enforcement Officer in the Austin area, and 10 years as a Missionary, Teresa joined the Topper Real Estate Team in 2019. Teresa started her Real Estate career as a Transaction Coordinator Specialist and shortly thereafter moved into working with both Buyers and Sellers. Teresa is active in the community serving on the City Council of Johnson City. She enjoys time with her husband and family.

Teresa brings with her knowledge of the Hill Country, problem-solving and negotiating skills, and a friendly attitude to all who enjoy Texas as she does.

Burnet County

Mitchell Sodek, General Manager – Central Texas Groundwater Conservation District

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Mitchell has experience conducting various monitoring programs, drilling exploratory wells, groundwater resource management, and leadership in regional and state water planning. He has been with the District since 2010, previously serving as the District Hydrologist for 7 years and the General Manager since 2017. Mitchell serves as the Chairman of Groundwater Management Area 8, is a member of Region K water planning group. He has a B.S. in Environmental Engineering from Tarleton State and an M.S. in

Geographic Information Systems from Penn State University. Mitchell's passion is everything about water - including fishing, boating, kayaking, and floating the river on a hot summer day.

Comal County

Lisa Swint, Mayor Pro Tem - Garden Ridge

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Lisa Swint is finishing up her second term on the Garden Ridge City Council and her first term as Mayor Pro Tem. Her most recent leadership role was as a member of the Comal Forward 2023 Bond Committee, where she advocated for the funding of Davenport High School facilities. As a servant leader, she believes building community and listening to citizen's views are essential to good governance. Swint is dedicated to preserving the rural charm of Garden Ridge and honoring the city slogan of, "Naturally Home".

Gillespie County

Paul Babb, General Manager – Hill Country Underground Water Conservation District

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Paul has 24 years of experience in natural resource management and research with a primary focus on the groundwater resources of central Texas and the Texas Hill Country. He currently serves as General Manager for the Hill Country Underground Water Conservation District. Paul is a graduate of Texas State University with a Bachelor of Science in Resource and Environmental Studies.

Clinton Bailey, City Manager - Fredericksburg

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Clinton Bailey is a licensed professional engineer in the State of Texas and has been involved in municipal government for over 27 years. Born and raised in West Texas, Bailey began his career working for the City of San Angelo as their City Engineer for 18 years before moving his family to Fredericksburg in 2013 when he was hired as the Director of Public Works and Utilities. In 2016 he was promoted to Assistant City Manager and oversaw Parks and Recreation, Lady Bird Johnson Golf Course and the Development Services Department. In May of 2022, the City Council appointed Bailey as the City Manager of Fredericksburg. Bailey earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering with an emphasis on Environmental and Water Resources Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin.

Garret Bonn, P.E., CFM, Assistant City Manager – Fredericksburg

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Garret Bonn was born and raised in Fredericksburg. After graduating from Texas A&M University with a degree in civil engineering in 2001, he worked as a civil engineering/land development consultant in Austin until 2007 when he went to work as a senior engineer and project manager for the City of Cedar Park. In 2015, he moved back to Fredericksburg and began working for the City of Fredericksburg where he currently serves as the Assistant City Manager. Garret was a member of the Leadership Gillespie County Class of 2019 and enjoys being active in the community and numerous

organizations including the Holy Ghost Lutheran Church Building Committee, Technical Director for the Global Leadership Summit, team member for the A.C.T.S. Retreat, and the Texas Floodplain Managers Association.

Melissa Eckert, County Engineer – Gillespie County

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Melissa Eckert was raised in the piney woods of East Texas and graduated from Texas A&M University with a degree in civil engineering in 2017. Melissa practiced structural engineering for a few years before changing direction and going to work for local government. In 2021, remote working options allowed Melissa and her husband to move back to his hometown of Fredericksburg, and shortly thereafter in 2023, Melissa began her role as the Gillespie County Engineer. Melissa aims to make a positive impact on the community and preserve the County's rural charm. Outside of work, Melissa enjoys hiking, riding horses, and spending time outdoors with her family.

Daniel Jones, County Judge – Gillespie County

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Daniel Jones was raised in D/FW, graduating from Allen High School in Allen, TX and attended law school at the University of Tulsa. He has practiced law for 17 years, with most of that time serving local government entities. Daniel was appointed as the Presiding Judge for the City of Fredericksburg Municipal Court in 2015. In 2017, Daniel left the Municipal Court to begin serving as the City Attorney for the City of Fredericksburg. As the City Attorney, Daniel provided legal guidance to elected officials and senior City management. At the end of 2022, Daniel left City Hall and moved across the street to the Gillespie County Courthouse to begin his first term as County Judge.

Emily Kirchner, City Councilmember – Fredericksburg

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Emily Eppright Kirchner is a Fredericksburg City Councilwoman, full-time mom, and part time Children's Director at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church. She holds a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M University and a master's in Public Affairs from the LBJ School at UT-Austin. She worked as a staffer in the Texas House of Representatives in Austin for over a decade, for Dennis Bonnen, Lyle Larson, and Ed Thompson, and for International Justice Mission in Washington, DC - a non-profit committed to ending violence against the poor. Councilwoman Kirchner, her husband Tim, and their two young children reside in Fredericksburg, where she is involved with Little Hearts Child Development Center, Fredericksburg Parks Foundation, and Leadership Gillespie County.

Bobby Watson, City Councilmember – Fredericksburg

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Bobby Watson moved to Fredericksburg in 1999, having grown up in Dallas, and graduated from UTA with a degree in Architecture. Bobby started his community involvement in Fredericksburg by participating in the 2008 Leadership Gillespie County program and then managed the Leadership program for the next 4 years. After serving on numerous boards, he was elected to the Fredericksburg City Council in 2014. Finding the balance between managing our town's continued growth, while maintaining the quality of life for Fredericksburg's residents is one of his most important priorities.

Don D. Weinheimer, Commissioner Precinct 4 – Gillespie County

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Don Weinheimer is a fifth generation Gillespie County resident. Don attended Fredericksburg High School and then went on to achieve a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Engineering from Texas A&M University in 1981. In 1989, Don married local Fredericksburg sweetheart, Colette Gillis Weinheimer. In 2022, Don ran for Gillespie County Commissioner, Precinct #4, and took office in January 2023. He is currently in his second year of his 4-year term.

Hays County

Ruben Becerra, County Judge – Hays County

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



In his first term as Hays County Judge, he served on the Capitol Area Council of Governments Executive Committee, CAPCOG Criminal Justice Executive Committee, and the Central Texas Clean Air Coalition Board. He is currently serving on the National Association of Counties Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Commission, the Policy Committee of the Texas Conference of Urban Counties, and the Hays County Election Board. He is Chair of the Hays County Election Commission, Records Management Officer, Director of Homeland Security, Director of Emergency Management and Vice-Chair of the Bail Bond Board. As the Hays County's Chief Budget Officer, he proposed and adopted the lowest tax rate in over thirty years. In his second term, he is continuing to work on a Center for Mental Wellness, Education and Research, establishing a centralized animal shelter, and modernizing the criminal justice system in Hays County.

Jim Chiles, Mayor – Wimberley

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Jim Chiles, served two terms as Council Member Place 4 starting in 2020 and was elected Mayor in May 2024. A graduate of Texas State University and Certified Public Accountant and has nearly 40 years working for oilfield service companies. Presently, he volunteers as the treasurer of the Wimberley Hills Property Owners Association and as co-captain of an aid station on the marathon course for Ironman Texas. Previously, he volunteered on the ticket services committee for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Jim and his wife, Ginger, have three daughters and seven grandchildren. They stay busy in their spare time enjoying all that the Hill Country has to offer.

Charlie Flatten, General Manager - Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Charlie is a Hill Country native with a background in both small business and regional water planning and management. He was born in New Braunfels, grew up in Beaumont, and came to Austin in 1984 to attend the University of Texas School of Architecture. After retiring from a long career in the local small business community, he completed a degree in Geography and a Masters in Resource Management, with a specialty in hydrology & geology from Texas State University. He is motivated by clean flowing swimming holes, spicy BBQ, polkas (Czech, German, Polish, or Tex-Mex); and believes that sustainable water management must be based on science, education, and a cooperative dialogue between the Hill

Country's diverse communities. He and his family live on an Edwards limestone outcrop in the shady headwaters of Indian Creek.

Gina Fulkerson, Mayor – Wimberley

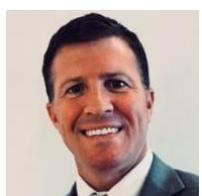
2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Gina Fulkerson served as the mayor of Wimberley May 2020-2024, and before that she was on the Wimberley ISD School Board for 12 years, serving as vice president and then president for 2 of those 12 years. Gina has volunteered with a variety of non-profits, serving for 10 years as a director of the Wimberley Education Foundation and 5 years as president of the Wimberley High School Academic Booster Club. Gina graduated from Baylor Law School and was a trial lawyer for over 40 years, defending schools, businesses, professionals and families. Gina, her husband, Tom, and their three children and grandchildren all live in and love the Texas Hill Country, its rivers, creeks, hills, and dark skies.

Tucker Furlow, Assistant District Attorney - Civil Division – Hays County

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



A native born and raised in the Texas Hill Country, Tucker graduated from Wimberley High School, Texas A&M University (BBA), and law schools in Orange County and Los Angeles, CA (J.D./LL.M). For the past two decades Tucker has served as legal counsel to multiple Texas State Agencies, leading him to his current role as a prosecutor for Hays County, Texas (General Counsel). Since being selected for the position, Tucker has provided steadfast and reliable representation for the County, elected officials, and department heads. When not practicing law, Tucker can be found pursuing a few of his passions, which include officiating NCAA basketball and enjoying time with his two sons.

Taline Manassian, Mayor Pro Tem – Dripping Springs

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Taline Manassian has been a member of City Council of Dripping Springs since 2017 and currently serves as Mayor Pro Tem. At the city, Taline also serves on the TIRZ No. 1 & No. 2 Board and has oversight of the Historic Preservation Commission and the Parks & Recreation Commission. Outside of her work for the city, Taline is an attorney at George Brothers Kincaid & Horton, LLP and since 2011, she has worked with and for Russ Horton. Taline is seeking ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and is currently a student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, where she is working towards a Master of Divinity, and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, where she is pursuing a Certificate in Advanced Theological Studies.

Rebecca Minnick, Mayor Pro Tem – Wimberley

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Rebecca has served on the Wimberley City Council as Mayor Pro Tem for nearly five years. During this time, Rebecca helped lead the city to complete a downtown sewer system, expanded downtown services, and implemented local ways of finding signage to reinforce the community's identity. Rebecca previously served on Wimberley's Planning & Zoning Commission, the Board of Adjustments and on the Board of the Wimberley Community Civic Club. Currently a Real Estate Agent, Rebecca previously served in several

positions in communications, public relations and marketing - including in a supporting role for the U.S. Space Shuttle Program.

Lon Shell, Commissioner Precinct 3 - Hays County

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Lon A. Shell has served as Hays County Commissioner, Precinct 3 since 2017, serving much of western San Marcos, portions of Kyle to the south and west, the Wimberley Valley, and rural areas west and north of Dripping Springs. He is President of the San Marcos Hays County EMS Board of Directors, Chairman of the Hays County Criminal Justice Coordinating Commission and the Combined Emergency Communications Center Executive Board, and serves on the boards of the Greater San Marcos Partnership, Region 11-Guadalupe Flood Planning Group, and Capital Area Regional Transportation Planning Organization (CARTPO). Shell is a graduate of San Marcos High School and Texas A&M University with a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Kendall County

Curt Campbell, Board Member - Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



In addition to serving as Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District, Curt Campbell is Vice President Engineering & Natural Resources at Westward Environmental, Inc. in Boerne, Texas. He has been involved with surface water and groundwater issues throughout his career, including projects concerning Public Water Supply wells, rainwater catchment, aquifer protection plans, storm water treatment, and floodplain development. He is a practicing Civil Engineer, a certified floodplain manager, and a LEED Accredited Professional in Neighborhood Development.

Ben Eldredge, Board Member - Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Ben Eldredge serves on the Board of Directors for the Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District and is Vice President of Conservation at the Cibolo Center for Conservation. Eldredge has served on the City of Boerne's Unified Development Code Committee and the Kendall County Transportation Planning Committee. He currently participates in Boerne's Mobility Master Plan Advisory Group, the Kendall County Water Committee, and is active on numerous additional planning and policy focus groups in the Hill Country. Eldredge has over 20 years of experience working as a land steward and advocate for the conservation of natural resources.

Dr. Joseph Macaluso, City Councilmember – Boerne

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Dr. Joseph Macaluso serves the City of Boerne as City Councilman, District 5. After visiting since the mid-80s, Dr. Macaluso and his wife Renée moved to Boerne in 2005 from New Orleans - where he spent most of his career as a urologic surgeon. Retired from clinical practice, Dr. Macaluso has experience in business, nonprofits, finance, and working with state and federal agencies through both medical societies and universities. As City Councilman, Dr. Macaluso is committed to maintaining the integrity of Boerne and

embracing the future by seeking growth and management practices that add to the overall health, safety, and quality of life of Boerne residents.

Andra Wisian, Commissioner Precinct 2 - Kendall County

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



A seventh-generation Texas native, Andra Wisian has lived in Kendall County for nearly 30 years and was elected Kendall County Commissioner in 2022. From April 2021 to December 2022, Wisian served as a Director to the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority. She was a key leader to create a very successful private-public partnership among county residents, Kendall County and Texas Parks & Wildlife to build the Youth Agriculture & Equestrian Center. Commissioner Wisian and her husband, Kirby, also run a registered Red Angus operation in South Texas and Kendall County.

Kerr County

Michael Hornes, Assistant City Manager – Kerrville

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Michael has served as one of two assistant city managers for the City of Kerrville since early 2022. Prior to his work in Kerrville, Michael has served as the assistant city manager for the City of Live Oak, as the city manager for the City of Palestine, and has worked for the cities of New York and Lubbock after starting his career in the oil and gas industry. Michael is a proud Red Raider and received both his bachelor's and master's degree from Texas Tech University. In his free time Michael enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife Charlie and their two boys, playing golf and camping with friends.

Drew Paxton, Planning Director – Kerrville

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Drew Paxton is the Director of Planning and Development for the City of Kerrville. Paxton received his bachelor's degree in Architecture from Texas Tech University and Masters in Business from Schreiner University. He has been with the City of Kerrville for 5 years. Paxton spends time as a clown with the Alzafar Shriners. Much of his spare time is spent with his wife, La'Cee and two girls outdoors at the river or in his woodshop.

Dalton Rice, City Manager - Kerrville

2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Dalton Rice, MSHS, CPM, became the City Manager of Kerrville in October 2023, following his tenure as City Manager for Morgan's Point Resort. With 13 years of service in the U.S. Army Special Forces, Dalton brings a diverse background that includes experience as a paramedic, firefighter, and healthcare administrator. He holds a B.S. in Business Administration and Law, an MSHS in Health Care Quality, and is a Certified Public Manager. Active in professional organizations, Dalton is a member of ICMA, TCMA, and serves on boards such as the Kerrville Economic Development Corporation (KEDC),

Elevate Adult Education, and Here's to Our Heroes. He also participates in community activities through the Rotary Club.

Kimble County

Hal Rose, Judge - Kimble County

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Hal Rose took office in January 2023 and is the principal in Rose Law Office, PLLC. Judge Rose has 32 years in legal practice with an emphasis in criminal, civil, and family law, business formation and transactions, real estate and agricultural law, mergers and acquisitions and related legal issues. In the past, he served in executive leadership and general counsel roles for healthcare, technology, manufacturing/distribution and retail companies. Rose earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, a J.D. from Southern Methodist University (SMU), and completed the SMU Cox School of Business Management Development Program.

Mason County

Robert L. Rayburn, Mayor – Mason

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Robert Rayburn lives in Mason Texas and currently serves on its City Commission. Robert is a native Texan who has spent much of his life hunting, fishing, and photographing Texas while studying its unique and diverse native flora and fauna. Robert received his BS degree from Texas A&M University in Landscape Architecture. He has spent most of his personal life and professional career expanding his understanding of the complex natural world and the legacy we leave for the next generation of Texans. Robert's appreciation for the Texas Hill Country began while working for Texas Parks and Wildlife in the 1970's and 80's. He believes the future of Texas and its treasured components are critically dependent up on the exposure and understanding we can offer and provide our youth and our policy leaders.

Medina County

Darrin Schroeder, Mayor - Castroville

2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Castroville, “the Little Alsace of Texas,” is an historic town with a strong community, unique architecture, and a people who love to live life together and to its fullest. Mayor Darrin Schroeder has been serving the city of Castroville for years, and he now does that as Mayor, or Chief Serving Officer, as he likes to state. He has a passion for the city, a love for the people, and a sense of responsibility to honor the Pioneers who planned, built and protected this town so that it could become what it is today. His greatest current challenge is dealing with the current triple digit growth in a way that ensures Castroville can grow as itself – and not “anywhere USA.”

Real County

Shawn Gray, Commissioner Precinct 2 – Real County

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Commissioner Shawn Gray was re-elected to her second term serving Real County in 2022. As Commissioner, Gray is concerned with increasing property values, declining affordable housing opportunities, and uncertain water availability in her rural community. Outside of her work as County Commissioner, Gray is a Real Estate Broker operating her own real estate company in downtown Leakey since October 2010. In the past, she has served as a Leakey ISD School Board Trustee, RCAD Board Member, and as

an officer on the Uvalde Board of Realtors. Prior to this work she also spent 12 years working in Round Rock ISD as a high school educator in the Career and Technology Department.

Bella A. Rubio, Judge - Real County
2023 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Judge Rubio is a fourth-generation resident, born and raised in Real County. She attended school at the Leakey Independent School District in Leakey, Texas from Kindergarten until she graduated in May of 1979. In 1996, she was elected to the position of County and District Clerk of Real County. During her tenure as Clerk, she served on several State-wide committees until retirement in 2016. In 2015, she was selected "Clerk of the Year" for the State of Texas by her Clerk colleagues. In 2018, she was honored and humbled to be elected as Real County's first Hispanic and female judge.

Travis County

Emily Ackland, Natural Resources and Environmental Quality Division Director – Travis County
2025 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Emily Ackland has over 20 years of experience working for local government. She began her career in Oregon as the Environmental Specialist for Marion County Public Works and went on to spend more than ten years working on environmental policy with the Association of Oregon Counties. During this time, she served as a registered lobbyist focused on state and federal legislation relating to environmental and renewable energy policy and later on county road related policy. In 2017 Emily moved back to Austin and has worked for Travis County in several roles since – from managing stormwater, air quality, sustainability, and community resiliency programs and the Balcones Canyonland Preserve to her current role as Division Director.

Ann Howard, Commissioner Precinct 3 - Travis County
2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



A native Texan, Ann earned BA, MPA and JD degrees from University of Texas - Austin. Her precinct stretches from downtown Austin westward past Briarcliff and northwest past Lago Vista on the north shore of Lake Travis and includes fast-growing communities along 620 and 183 as well as the majority of the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge. Much of Commissioner Howard's work focuses on balancing growth with environmental stewardship amidst the jurisdictional soup that oversees transportation, land use, and water. Past leadership experience includes serving as congregation president at St. Martin's Lutheran Church, the former executive director of ECHO - the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition, and as a former junior attorney on the US Senate Judiciary Committee to now President Joe Biden.

Uvalde County

Cynthia Casburn, Municipal Judge - Sabinal/Uvalde County

2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute



Cynthia holds an Associate's Degree in Legal Assisting, a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice and a Master's Degree in Public Administration. From working within the chambers and courtrooms of Federal Judges in the Western District of Texas and as an adjunct professor of Federal Government at the college level, to becoming the Municipal Court Judge for the City of Sabinal, Cynthia's focus in Sabinal, alongside her judicial duties, is on conservation, community and economic development and school improvement.

Judge Casburn currently serves on the Middle Rio Grande Development Council's Solid Waste Advisory Committee, the Southwest Texas Junior College Criminal Justice Advisory Board, as well as their Law Enforcement Advisory Board. She is the Chairman of Keep Sabinal Beautiful, Area Coordinator for Samaritan's Purse and gladly serves on the Sabinal Independent School District's District Improvement Leadership Team.