



2026 HILL COUNTRY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

—Small Choices, Big Changes—

THURSDAY, SEPT. 24 | CAMP LUCY · DRIPPING SPRINGS, TEXAS

- 8:00-8:45** **Breakfast and Networking**
- 8:45-9:00** **Welcome and Opening Remarks**
- 9:00-9:45** **Mediating Scales in Landscape Planning**
We are currently barraged with choices at enormous scale when shaping the built environment, yet often the most empowering responses are practical, direct, and small. In the urban context, it is out of necessity that we search for novel ways to stabilize banks and regenerate landscapes, however suburban and rural contexts are increasingly facing urban problems— flood impacts, resource scarcity, loss of biodiversity and ecological function. This presentation will explore potential ways Waller Creek’s hybrid solutions and creative problem-solving strategies can be applied outside of urban centers.
Gullivar Shepard – Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates
- 9:45-10:30** **Flood Recovery in the Hill Country**
In recent years, the Hill Country has faced record flooding spanning multiple watersheds and political jurisdictions. These challenges must be met by locally driven solutions, crafted by leaders who understand the singular nature of their communities. What can we do—as land stewards, residents, and conservation champions—to strengthen the natural infrastructure of the Hill Country? This panel will explore different solutions leaders have deployed to help their communities respond to present needs and build resilience for the future.
Moderator: Daniel Oppenheimer - Hill Country Alliance
Panelists: Austin Dickson – Community Foundation of the Texas Hill Country | Northern Hendricks – Landowner and volunteer | Commissioner Ann Howard – Travis County
- 10:30-10:50** **MINI-NETWORKING BREAK**
- 10:50-11:55** **KEYNOTE: Re-hydrating and Re-enlivening Our Communities**
This dynamic keynote will share patterns and strategies to harvest, integrate, and enliven free local resources in a way that generates far more potential than the sum of their parts. Scarcity is re-visioned into abundance simply through creative cycling and utilization of what is already at hand. Costly and consuming habits and infrastructure are reoriented and reconnected to maximize enriching opportunities. Brad will share examples of community transformation - including how simple, hand-built structures are regenerating dying wetlands and creek, how illegal urban water harvesting was legalized and incentivized, and how blighted, overheated streets were transformed into thriving, flood-controlling greenbelts by planting native food forests.
Brad Lancaster, Author and Permaculture Designer – Harvesting Rainwater
- 11:55-1:00** **LUNCH BREAK**
- 1:00-1:30** **Heart of the Hill Country Award honoring Ira Yates and Wayne Gosnell**
Presented by: Christy Muse and Carolyn Chipman Evans

- 1:30-2:15** **Neighbor to Neighbor – Mobilizing Toward Collective Action**
There is power in knowing your neighbors – whether you share a fenceline, an apartment complex, or a ZIP code. This panel brings together individuals representing three different approaches to tackling local challenges where the power of community coming together has turned the tide. Panelists will discuss both the challenges and opportunities that have come from getting to know their neighbors as well as strategies that can help advance more sustainable practices across the region, starting at home.
Moderator: Lauro Martinez – Hill Country Alliance
Panelists: Roger Wallace – Friends of the Little Blanco River Valley | David Zambrano – The Eyes of the San Marcos River | Jada Jo Smith – Hill Country Preservation Coalition
- 2:15-2:45** **NETWORKING BREAK**
- 2:45-3:15** **A Tale of Two Counties: Night Sky Edition**
Across the Hill Country, passionate volunteers are stepping up and finding creative ways to protect our view of starry night skies. During this presentation and discussion, we'll hear stories of this inspiring work from two different communities – from starting a Friends of the Night Sky group to changing public perceptions and supporting local policy changes.
 Leah Jenkins – Williamson County Friends of the Night Sky & Kathleen Brinkman – Kerr County Friends of the Night Sky
- 3:15-3:45** **Grassroots and Grasstops: Supporting Leaders Across the Region**
Leaders give time, energy, and resources to support their communities – to address challenges others shy away from, to seize opportunities others overlook, and to point a way forward that is both visionary and practical. But who supports them? This panel of Hill Country Alliance (HCA) staff will unpack some of HCA's key programs designed to provide our region's leaders the networks, resources, and inspiration they can use to achieve their goals for their communities.
Moderator: Cliff Kaplan
Panelists: Leah Cuddeback, Grace Gilker, and Rebeca Gibson
- 3:45-4:15** **Lightning Round: Small Choices, Big Changes – 5 minutes each**
- Data Centers: What We Know and What We Don't – *Adrian Shelley, Public Citizen*
 - The Return of Buffalo: Land, People, and Self – *Sarah Mendez, Texas Tribal Buffalo Project*
 - Preserving Night Skies at Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape – *Tonda Sallee, US Air Force*
 - Fungi, Lightning, and the Electric Web Beneath Our Feet – *Angel Schatz, Central Texas Mycological Society*
- 4:15-4:30** **Impact and Intention – The Work of Our Alliance**
We will close the day with a celebration of the Alliance at the core of our organization. As we wrap up our 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, HCA is reflecting on the last five years of work for the Hill Country. Behind every success story is a myriad of partners who made it a reality - join us in celebrating those accomplishments and setting our sights toward the future!
 Katherine Romans, Hill Country Alliance
- 4:30-6:30** **HAPPY HOUR NETWORKING RECEPTION**

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Gullivar Shepard, Partner – Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates

Gullivar is recognized for his skill in navigating programmatic requirements, regulatory and jurisdictional hurdles, and problematic site conditions to create rich public spaces. With a background in architecture, his expertise ranges from the fine details of building landscapes to planning and managing MVVA's large, complex urban projects. Since he joined the firm in 1999, he has applied his integrated design approach to challenges such as ecological restoration, flood control, transportation planning, and choreographing connections to parks and waterfronts. Since 2013, Gullivar has led the planning and design of a 2.5-mile long greenway along Waller Creek in downtown Austin, Texas. The first phase, Waterloo Park, opened in 2021, and Phase II, The Confluence, opened in June 2026. In addition to Waterloo Greenway, he is leading multiple planning and design efforts for the UT-Austin campus.



Daniel Oppenheimer, Land Program Director – Hill Country Alliance

At HCA, Daniel works with private landowners, agency and non-profit partners, and communities to enhance riparian habitat and watershed health, to foster regional collaboration and stewardship across watersheds, and to increase private land conservation in the Texas Hill Country. He also oversees collaboration related to the Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership. Prior to joining HCA, Daniel worked for the Tamarisk Coalition, coordinating the Dolores River Restoration Partnership in southwestern Colorado and eastern Utah, and for Nueces River Authority, implementing riparian restoration projects on the Sabinal and Nueces Rivers.



Ann Howard, Commissioner Precinct 3 - Travis County

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, including fast-growing communities along 620 and 183 and the majority of the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge. Much of her 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 President Joe Biden.



Austin Dickson, CEO – Community Foundation of the Texas Hill Country

Austin Dickson is the CEO of the Community Foundation of the Texas Hill Country, which has become a nationally recognized leader in community philanthropy and long-term disaster recovery, directing one of the largest philanthropic disaster response efforts in Texas history. When not working on flood recovery, the Foundation makes grants to Hill Country nonprofits and awards scholarships to students pursuing higher education. Austin has served in the role since 2017. A seventh-generation Texan and a graduate of Texas Christian University, Austin holds master's degrees from the University of Edinburgh, Emory University, and Georgia Tech. For 20 years,

Austin has taught and mentored the next generation of leaders. He currently teaches graduate courses in nonprofit management at the University of Texas at San Antonio.



Northern Hendricks, Landowner and Volunteer – Kerr Together River Working Group

Northern Hendricks is a landowner in Kendall and Kerr Counties dedicated to wildlife conservation and the health of the land. She is a member of the Kerr Together Long-Term Recovery River Working Group, Kerr County's disaster response organization. After experiencing three historic floods between 2025 and 2026, she focused her recovery efforts on working with nature, using flood debris to provide wildlife habitat, reduce erosion, and preserve native plant communities through subsequent flood events. Northern has served on the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Wildlife Conservation Advisory Committee and is an enthusiastic advocate for all wildlife, from deer and songbirds to tarantulas and snakes.



Brad Lancaster, Author & Permaculture Expert – Harvesting Rainwater

Brad Lancaster is the author of the award-winning book *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond* and co-founder of NeighborhoodForesters.org. Since 1993, Brad has run a successful permaculture education, design, and consultation business focused on integrated regenerative approaches to landscape design, planning, and living. In the Sonoran Desert, with just 11 inches (280 mm) of average annual rainfall, he and his brother's family harvest about 100,000 gallons (378,000 liters) of rainwater a year on an eighth-acre (0.05 ha) urban lot and adjoining right-of-way. This harvested water is then turned into living air conditioners of food-bearing shade trees, abundant gardens, and a thriving landscape incorporating wildlife habitat, beauty, medicinal plants, and more. The goal of his book series and overall work is to empower his clients and community to make positive change in their own lives and neighborhoods – by harvesting and enhancing free on-site resources such as water, sun, wind, shade, community, and more.



Roger Wallace, Founder - Friends of the Little Blanco River Valley

Roger Wallace lives beside the Little Blanco River and alongside his wife, Mary Wallace, and their neighbors, founded the Friends of the Little Blanco River Valley in 2019 after noticing an increase in land fragmentation, development, and the loss of local ecosystem services. In addition to his conservation work along the Little Blanco River Valley, Roger has had a distinguished career in international business and public service. His accomplishments include serving as Senior Advisor to the Chairman of Pioneer Natural Resources Company, Minister Counselor for Commercial Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, and Deputy Under Secretary for International Trade at the U.S. Department of Commerce.



Lauro Martinez, Landowner Outreach and Stewardship Manager – Hill Country Alliance

Lauro joined the Hill Country Alliance in 2024 and serves as the landowner outreach and stewardship manager, working with landowners across the Hill Country to connect them with resources and opportunities to achieve their individual land management goals. He is originally from Laredo, Texas, where he learned the importance of responsible land stewardship from his family ranch, La Selva. Lauro has a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science and Policy from St. Edwards University and spent his early career conducting erosion and stormwater inspections of construction sites throughout Central Texas. Before joining HCA, Lauro most recently worked in South Texas as an Outreach

Coordinator with Rio Grande International Study Center, where he assisted landowners and the broader community in protecting and preserving the region's natural resources.



David Zambrano, Education and Outreach Coordinator – The Eyes of the San Marcos River

David Zambrano is a lifelong resident of the Texas Hill Country. Born in San Antonio, he pursued degrees in sociology at both the University of Texas at Austin, and Texas State University in San Marcos. He can often be found on a river cleanup somewhere in Central Texas and also enjoys long walks on the beach with a trash grabber. He has a handful of hobbies that don't look like work, including instant photography, craft beer, and cycling.



Jada Jo Smith, President – Hill Country Preservation Coalition

Jada Jo leads the Hill Country Preservation Coalition's efforts to protect and preserve the Hill Country and Devils River region from the proposed Howard Solstice 765kV transmission line. She is Broker/Owner of Orange Blossom Real Estate with over 20 years of experience in real estate, title, minerals, and land stewardship. A Hill Country Leadership Institute alum and Board Member of the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District, Jada Jo is also a homeschool mom, entrepreneur, and conservation advocate. Raised on Orange Blossom Farm in Carrizo Springs, she

developed a passion for water and conservation through years of involvement in land stewardship, groundwater, and watershed education.



Leah Jenkins, President – Williamson County Friends of the Night Sky

Leah Jenkins is a Partnership Lead and Board Member for DarkSky Texas and President of the Williamson County Friends of the Night Sky. She is also a core volunteer with Liberty Hill Save Our Stars, supporting community education and advocacy that helped Liberty Hill become Williamson County's first International Dark Sky Community. Leah is passionate about translating the science of light pollution into practical solutions that protect human health, wildlife, plants, and the natural nighttime environment. Her work focuses on helping communities understand that

better lighting can mean healthier habitats, and better nights for all. To describe Leah in one sentence: Defending the night for health, habitat, and all things leafed, winged, and wild!



Kathleen Brinkman, President – Kerr County Friends of the Night Sky

Kathleen is a Texas transplant for 20+ years and recovering attorney, with degrees from Hollins University and University of Denver (JD & Masters in Environmental Management). She is a founding member of the KCFNS and is committed to preserving, and enhancing, our Hill Country view of the Milky Way. Outside of her night sky work, she serves as CEO of LDB Corporation based in Kerrville, TX.



Cliff Kaplan, Program Director – Hill Country Alliance

Cliff first came to HCA as an intern in 2015, while completing his graduate studies. In his current role as Program Director, he supports the team working on HCA's Water, Night Skies, and Communities programs. He is on the board of directors for the Llano River Watershed Alliance and serves as secretary of the Texans for Responsible Aggregate Mining (TRAM) coalition. Cliff holds masters degrees in Community and Regional Planning and Public Affairs from the University of Texas at Austin.



Rebeca Gibson, Regional Engagement Manager – Hill Country Alliance

Rebeca was raised in Spring, Texas, and is a graduate of the University of Houston. After graduation, she and her daughter made their home in Bandera, Texas, where Rebeca has built a life rooted in service, community, and stewardship of the Hill Country. She spent twelve years working in public education before transitioning into real estate, and later into nonprofit work as a grant program manager. Her dedication to civic service led her to serve the City of Bandera as a council member from 2015-2022, and as mayor from 2022-2024. Since 2021, Rebeca has served on the Board of

Directors for the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District. Rebeca now works as HCA's first Regional Engagement Manager, serving Bandera, Kendall, Kerr, and Medina Counties.



Grace Gilker, Communities Program Manager – Hill Country Alliance

Grace joined HCA in the spring of 2024 and manages the Communities Program, which engages and serves as a resource for communities across the region. She coordinates the County-to-County Coalition, facilitates the Leading in the Rural Hill Country series, helps highlight Hill Country-specific policy resources across the region, and connects Hill Country leaders to the Texas Legislature. Prior to HCA, she served as the Net Zero Liaison for Texas Water Trade, developing a comprehensive toolkit introducing Texas developers to onsite water reuse systems and resources.



Leah Cuddeback, Leadership Program Manager – Hill Country Alliance

Leah has spent over a decade working for various nonprofits in Central Texas in roles focused on science, communication, and environmental education. She has been with HCA since 2018 and currently serves as Leadership Program Manager, organizing HCA's annual Leadership Summit and overseeing the Hill Country Leadership Institute, a ten-month program aimed at connecting regional leaders with a focus on local planning and natural resource management challenges and solutions. Leah received her B.S. in Wildlife Biology from Texas State and volunteers locally on

the Wimberley Parks & Recreation Advisory Board, the San Marcos River Foundation Board, and the Region 11 Guadalupe Regional Flood Planning Group.



Katherine Romans, Executive Director – Hill Country Alliance

Katherine brings more than two decades of nonprofit management, community engagement, communications, and legislative experience to bear on the natural resource challenges facing Central Texas. Under her leadership HCA has doubled in size, formalized its programmatic focal areas, and launched several new visionary collaborative conservation projects. Katherine holds a Master of Environmental Management from the Yale School of the Environment. She resides in Austin, Texas with her husband and two young children.

LIGHTNING ROUND:



Adrian Shelley, Texas Director – Public Citizen

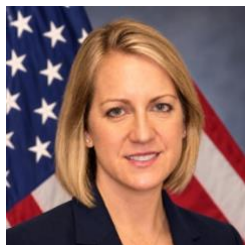
Adrian Shelley is a native Texan from the City of Houston. He joined Public Citizen in 2017 as the Director of the Texas Office where he works on issues including clean energy, public health and environmental enforcement, nuclear safety, and ethics reform. At Public Citizen he has celebrated victories including the passage of climate plans in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio and the planned closure of coal plants including the J.K. Spruce plant in San Antonio. Adrian has a law degree from the University of Texas and previously served as the Executive Director for Air Alliance

Houston. He enjoys spending time with his family, reading, playing music, growing food and other plants, and the outdoors.



Sarah Mendez, Executive Assistant - Texas Tribal Buffalo Project

Sarah supports Indigenous-led buffalo restoration, food sovereignty, youth education, and ecological stewardship at Texas Tribal Buffalo Project. A Native woman of Chichimeca descent, bison caretaker, and signatory witness to the Buffalo Treaty, her work is grounded in reconnection, healing, and honoring buffalo as sacred relatives. Originally from Dallas, Texas, Sarah is a trained professional dancer and performance artist, as well as a *danzante* with Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli, a former teacher with Aztech Kidz Code, and a former educator with Junior Players. Deeply rooted in her spiritual community, she draws on movement, ceremony, ancestral teachings, and collective care to support cultural continuity and Indigenous resurgence.



Tonda Saltee, REPI Program Management Specialist - Department of the Air Force

Tonda Saltee serves as a Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program Management Specialist with the Department of the Air Force, where she works with military installations, conservation organizations, local governments, and other partners to protect military missions while advancing compatible land use and conservation. Her work includes conservation and restrictive-use easements, resilience projects, and collaborative efforts addressing development, wildfire, flooding, and other encroachment challenges. Tonda supports the JBSA-Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape and serves on the Night Sky Preservation Committee, helping connect responsible outdoor lighting and night sky preservation with military mission readiness, and finding collaborative solutions.



Angel Schatz, Executive Director – Central Texas Mycological Society

Angel grew up in Missouri with ten siblings, where her first fungal encounter—fittingly—was the Destroying Angel, an introduction to just how powerful and mysterious mushrooms can be. After years as an experience designer and animator in tech, Angel left to plug into a very different network: the earth's hidden mycelium network. Now a forager, urban gardener, and mycology educator, she helps Central Texans connect to fungi through joyful, practical, community-powered work—whether we're growing mushrooms from recycled blocks or using fungal rich soil to help trees survive drought, we're building soil and solidarity.