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## **Local Leaders Discuss Land Conservation and Legacy as 2026 Hill Country Leadership Institute Draws to a Close**

**Hunt, Texas** – On Thursday, October 15, the Hill Country Alliance (HCA) convened its final gathering of the 2026 Hill Country Leadership Institute. Kerr Wildlife Management Area, a 6,500-acre property and living laboratory stewarded by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, provided the perfect backdrop for a conversation on land conservation and legacy.

The Hill Country Leadership Institute program is a traveling, ten-month educational series that frequently spotlights regional conservation legacy projects, from Bamberger Ranch in Blanco County to the Headwaters at the Comal in New Braunfels and the Cibolo Center for Conservation in Boerne. According to participants, these locations are a huge part of the program's draw, offering opportunities to see how communities are working to conserve the places that make the Hill Country unique.

"One of the most inspiring aspects of the Hill Country Alliance Leadership Institute was seeing firsthand how local communities are coming together to protect what makes the Hill Country special," said Burnet County Commissioner Damon Beierle. "The opportunity to learn in unique settings where partnerships are already making a difference reinforced that successful land stewardship isn't just about protecting land, it's about protecting our heritage, our communities, and the future generations who will call this place home. Seeing these successes in action reminded me that meaningful conservation begins with relationships, collaboration, and people willing to lead."

According to a recent report by Texas A&M and Texan by Nature that surveyed more than 3,000 adults nationwide, "79% agreed that *'having wild, open spaces is part of being an American.'*" This legacy of conservation has clearly resonated across Texas with the passage of the \$1 billion Texas Centennial Parks Fund in 2023 and more locally through specific ballot initiatives. With less than 5% of Texas' land conserved or otherwise formally protected from development, the impact of rampant growth has become a challenge felt deeply by many communities and residents in both rural and urban areas.

In response, several Hill Country communities have utilized public funding to acquire or protect land for a myriad of benefits – from public parks and wildlife habitat to flood mitigation, aquifer recharge, and water quality protection. In 2020, voters in Hays County – consistently ranked as one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation – approved a \$75 million bond to support the creation of new public parks and open spaces, like Sentinel Peak Preserve on the Blanco River and Karst Canyon Preserve in Wimberley. Similarly, in 2022 Kendall County voters passed a ballot initiative that dedicated \$20 million to protect land through voluntary conservation easements with willing landowners and through the purchase of land for parks and open space.

"Kendall County voters entrusted us with \$20 million to conserve land as our county grows. We've put those dollars to work through voluntary conservation easements with willing landowners and purchases such as the 321-acre Guadalupe River Ranch property," said Leadership Institute alum and Kendall County Commissioner Andra Wisian. "These approaches protect private property rights, preserve our

rural heritage, and safeguard land that supports water quality. Conservation easements stretch those public dollars while keeping land in private ownership.”

“The Hill Country Alliance Leadership Institute reinforced something I believe, while each of our communities has its own unique challenges, we share a common responsibility to protect the future of the Hill Country. This program brings together leaders from across the region, allowing us to learn from one another, build meaningful relationships, and recognize that our voices are stronger when we work together,” said Commissioner Beierle adding, “the connections made and perspectives gained go far beyond the sessions. I would encourage any leader who cares about the future of their community to participate. The Hill Country doesn’t stop at county lines, and neither should our commitment to preserving what makes this region special.”

Established in 2023, the Institute’s monthly meetings run from January through October and bring together roughly 15-20 local elected officials from communities across the Texas Hill Country region who are committed to sustaining our region’s existing quality of life and unique character. Participants have included county judges and commissioners, groundwater district managers and board members, as well as city mayors, councilmembers and key staff from fifteen counties. By creating space for leaders across different levels of government to come together to discuss shared challenges and opportunities, Institute participants have the chance to share notes and lessons learned from one another and find locally driven, balanced solutions that protect both the ecological and economic health of the Hill Country.

The 2027 class of the Hill Country Leadership Institute is forming now and interested local leaders from Hill Country counties, cities, and groundwater conservation districts are encouraged to apply on the Hill Country Alliance website or by emailing Leah Cuddeback, HCA’s Leadership Program Manager at [leah@hillcountryalliance.org](mailto:leah@hillcountryalliance.org).

### **About the Hill Country Alliance**

*The Hill Country Leadership Institute is a program of the Hill Country Alliance. Hill Country Alliance is a 501c3 non-profit established in 2004, bringing together a diverse coalition of partners to preserve the open spaces, starry night skies, clean and abundant waters, and unique character of the Texas Hill Country.*

[Photos are available for use here.](#)