



by Annalisa Peace

Groundwater hydrologists refer to the Edwards as the “Queen Mother of aquifers” because it is so uniquely prolific. But, the very features that facilitate extraordinarily rapid recharge of the Edwards Aquifer also make it extremely vulnerable to pollution. I cannot say this often enough, “The Edwards **Does Not** filter water.”

As reported in [previous entries](#) on this site, we are not being good stewards of this resource. San Antonio is one of the few major cities in the world with a water supply that does not require treatment prior to distribution. Rather than capitalizing on this wonderful asset, we have consistently ignored the advice of experts on how best to protect our groundwater, even passing up [opportunities to permanently protect the sensitive area of the Edwards](#).

In the early 1990’s local politicians declined to fund opportunities to purchase most of the Edwards Recharge Zone (ERZ) in Bexar County from the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC) at bargain basement prices. Even more remarkably, they declined to accept extremely sensitive parcels of land on the ERZ offered as donations by the RTC. Consequently, this land was purchased back from the RTC for, in most cases, ten cents on the dollar by the same developers who had defaulted on their loans in the first place. Today we face the idiotic situation whereby San Antonio’s most intensive urban development has taken place over our most environmentally sensitive area—the ERZ.

The problem has been exacerbated by TCEQ (Texas Commission on Environmental Quality) Commissioners who never met a permit application they didn’t like, by engineers who couldn’t identify a recharge feature if they fell into one, by a City Development Services Department that brought you the [sliding homes of River Mist](#) and by City Planning and Zoning Commissions that discourage citizen participation by meeting during working hours. On top of that, we’ve endured lackadaisical enforcement of the worst set of water quality ordinances of any city on the Edwards.

In the long run, placing blame may be instructive, but counterproductive. How to fix this situation?

First, we can and should [purchase land and development rights](#) to permanently protect the aquifer. It is especially important to prioritize Prop. 1 purchases in areas that are most in danger of being developed.

While [leaving the land undeveloped is clearly the best option](#), we cannot afford to rely on purchase as our only means of protecting the Edwards. We must regulate development with measures that prevent or minimize pollution and preserve the integrity of this elegant ecosystem.



*Our sensitive Edwards Aquifer: Julie Jenkins, of Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District, demonstrates how easily pollutants can enter the Aquifer. Photo courtesy Annalisa Peace*

Developers complain, and rightly so, about multiple jurisdictions with various Water Quality regulations. What is needed is one agency with the authority and expertise to adequately regulate the Edwards. We believe that the obvious choice is the Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA). The **Edwards Directors** are elected for the sole purpose of managing this resource. They have hired an excellent staff to advise on how to do it right. It makes sense to put all the expertise for properly managing this system under one roof.

But, so far, the EAA has been reluctant to assume the authority to regulate water quality. While it is easy to point fingers, in reality there has to be consolidated support for the EAA taking control. EAA trustees realize that they lack such support. When they convened a task force in 2010 to explore the prospect of regulating impervious cover on the Recharge and Contributing zones, members representing the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and (surprisingly) **SAWS** vigorously opposed the prospect of meaningful regulation by the EAA. This opposition mystified representatives from other cities, who wondered why San Antonio, which already enforces impervious cover limits, would be so opposed to applying them throughout the region. Why, indeed?



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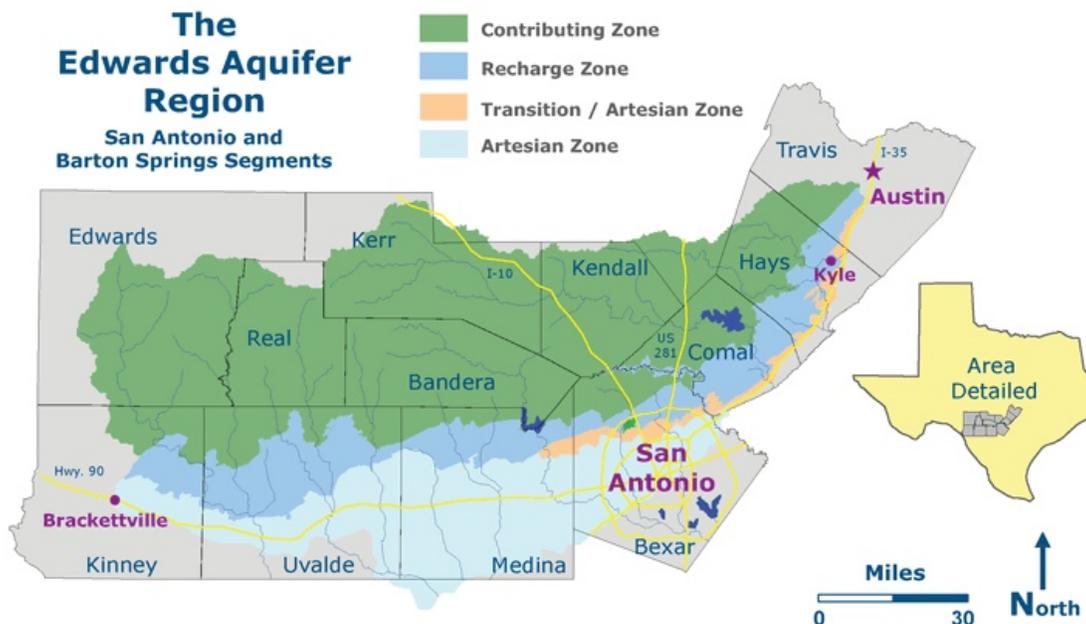


In the short term, the City of San Antonio should contract the EAA to enforce our local water quality ordinances. In the long term, TCEQ should cede formulation and enforcement of the Edwards Rules to the EAA. The former action merely requires direction from San Antonio's City Council. The latter would require recognition by the State Legislature that the EAA can and should be empowered with the authority to regulate water quality as well as allocation of the Edwards. Given the influence of our local delegation of State Representatives, this is not impossible unless the two Perry's (Rick and Bob) decide to veto such action.

Supposing the State does recognize the authority of the EAA to adequately regulate water quality, we must anticipate that elections for Edwards Directors will become highly politicized. Voters will need to empower the representatives on the EAA with a record of concern for the aquifer and replace those who think TCEQ is doing a good job of protecting the Edwards.

Additionally, we need to recognize that the Edwards Contributing Zone is in need of protection. Locally, the San Geronimo Valley (almost entirely on the Contributing Zone) contributes approximately 7% to 15% of the water recharging the Edwards through infiltration within San Geronimo Creek. There are equally sensitive contributing lands throughout the Edwards region.

To further complicate matters, the Contributing Zone for the Edwards is also the Recharge Zone for many areas of the Trinity Aquifer system. These areas are in need of regulatory protection. More simply, we need to make it a regional mantra to direct intensive development off the recharge and contributing zones. Any development permitted within this region must be low density, and must adhere to the practices of Low Impact Development to assure high quality recharge to replenish our aquifers.



Edwards Aquifer Region, map via Braun&Gresham

San Antonio has provided the rest of the Edwards Region with a dramatic example of what not to do. Now that sprawl has spread beyond San Antonio's ETJ (Extra Territorial Jurisdiction), other municipalities and counties are feeling the pressure. Given projections for growth in the Hill Country, it is past time for us to institute regional solutions to protect the Edwards Aquifer. Adequate regulation is critical for the cities of New Braunfels and San Marcos, which enjoy vibrant tourist economies dependent on flows from Edwards Aquifer springs. Building centralized sewage systems, big box stores, and intensive urban development within watersheds that contribute to these spring flows could render them unfit for recreation.

The **Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA)** **research and education projects** aim to determine how to best protect our groundwater resources and will, we hope, lead to informed decisions and effective policies.

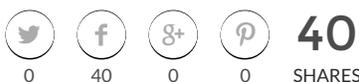
Each legislative session GEAA engages our **member groups** and citizens throughout the region in advocacy of a comprehensive **legislative agenda**. **Add your voice** to those who communicate regularly with their State Representatives during the Legislative session. And support the many fine environmental groups that are working hard to protect our natural resources.

Based on GEAA's membership, I know that agreement on the need to preserve our water resources transcends political subdivisions and parties. And I truly believe that the vast majority of citizens in our region want to make sure that our groundwater supplies can continue to sustain our region as we grow and develop.

*Annalisa Peace is the executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, uniting 51 organizations throughout a 21-county region in Central and South Texas behind a plan to protect the Edwards Aquifer, its contributing watersheds, and the Texas Hill Country.*

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**JNHSC** on 15 June, 2012 at 00:56

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This is a great article and she did not over exaggerate the real and imminent threat to our regions water supply. One thing we must learn is that protecting a watershed's water after it is developed is a guaranteed failure. Once the watersheds are developed they loose their most valuable asset that is their ability to temporally store and filter water that is now lost to storm water runoff. The water that is lost surges to the oceans where urea in the waste water discharges causes Red Tides which destroys our fishing industry, but more importantly The impervious cover and the draining of perched aquifers eliminates spring flows to recharge features and surface water systems that TCEQ needs to dilute permitted discharges to legal limits. When TCEQ does not have enough water to fill these discharge permits then the only alternative they have (since refusing a permit is not an option) left is to increase the legal discharge limits. So the paradox is More sprawl = less water resources while more sprawl requires more water resources while our elected officials believe that to have prosperity we must produce urban sprawl