

Activating the San Marcos River Waterfront



Panel sponsored by:



About the Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a nonpartisan research and education organization focused on providing leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. As the oldest and largest network of cross-disciplinary real estate and land use experts in the world, ULI facilitates an open exchange of ideas, information, best practices and experience among industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places. ULI has long been recognized as one of the world's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

ULI's Primary Focus: ULI is not an advocacy or lobbying organization. ULI focuses on:

- **EDUCATION** of our members and community on current trends and emerging topics.
- **RESEARCH** both locally and nationally into best practices in real estate development and land use.
- **RESOURCE** for best practices in the industry using both local and national ULI research and experts.

Founded in 1936, ULI now has 42,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines working in private enterprise and public service. ULI members are involved in all aspects of the development and city planning process – including private, public, and non-profit.

ULI Austin District Council, Serving Central Texas

The ULI Austin District Council strives to advance the mission of the Urban Land Institute at a local level. The ULI Austin District Council was founded in 1994 and now includes over 900 members spanning Central Texas. As a member-led organization, ULI's strength lies in its members' industry knowledge and expertise. For more information about ULI Austin, contact 512.853.9803 | Austin@uli.org | austin.uli.org.

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About ULI Advisory Services

The goal of ULI's Advisory Services Program is to bring the finest expertise in land use to advise on complex land use planning and development projects, programs and policies. Since 1947, this program has assembled over 750 ULI member teams to help organizations find creative, practical solutions for issues such as downtown redevelopment, land management strategies, evaluation of development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, provision of low-cost and affordable housing, and asset management strategies, among other matters. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's Advisory Services.

ULI offers two services under this program: An Advisory Service Panel (ASP) and a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP). Each panel team is comprised of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time as ULI Members. Panelists are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and carefully screened to ensure objectivity. ULI's interdisciplinary panel teams provide a holistic look at development problems. Both TAPs and ASPs have similar components; however, an ASP is a more in-depth and intense approach requiring additional hours, research and funding than a TAP.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAP)

ULI has a long history of providing unbiased, pragmatic solutions and advice on best practices related to land use and sustainable development. Technical Assistance Panels provide comprehensive and strategic advice in response to a specific land use or development challenge. By leveraging the expertise of ULI's vast member network, non-profit and municipal leaders have access to a unique perspective and a multidisciplinary team of real estate experts whose collective advisory guidance can only be found in ULI.

The TAP Process

- Pre-Panel:** In the months leading up to the panel exercise, information was gathered, in collaboration with the sponsoring organizations, to prepare briefing materials and help the ULI Panelists form a thorough understanding of the land-use challenge.
- Panel Exercise:** ULI panelists conducted two full-day working sessions to thoroughly examine the land-use challenge. Over 50 confidential interviews were conducted with community leaders and local stakeholders, local business owners, residents, public agencies, and other subject matter experts. At the end of the two-day panel exercise, ULI panelists met privately with the sponsoring organizations to present preliminary recommendations.
- Final Report:** After the panel, a printed report, summarizing the panel exercise and outlining practical recommendations for next steps, is published. In fulfillment of the mission of the Urban Land Institute, the Technical Assistance Panel report is intended to provide objective advice that promotes the responsible use of land to enhance the environment. The final report is publicly available on ULI Austin's website: <https://austin.uli.org/>

A major strength of the Advisory Services Program is ULI's unique ability to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its members, including land developers and owners, public officials, academicians, representatives of financial institutions, and others.

ULI Panel Assignment

The City of San Marcos, the Greater San Marcos Partnership, and Texas State University partnered with the Austin District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to conduct a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to examine land use along the San Marcos River and offer recommendations for ways to unlock economic potential by making the river more connected to downtown and creating pedestrian-focused places that are more easily accessible to residents and visitors.

Panel Assumptions

- The area examined by the TAP is the headwaters of the San Marcos river at Spring Lake to the A.E. Wood Fish Hatchery located south and east of Cape Street (approx. 1.5 miles total length). See Appendix A: San Marcos River Access Locations for the locations referenced throughout in this document.
- The scope of the TAP does not include studying opportunities to improve City Park and other parks or amenities along the riverfront beyond consideration for activating the riverfront.
- The TAP will provide recommendations on process improvements and areas of opportunity; however, will not produce a masterplan.

Panel Goals & Outcomes

- Recommend strategies to activate the San Marcos River and adjacent land, making it more connected to downtown and creating pedestrian-focused places that are easily accessible to residents and visitors.
- Identify best practices and recommend innovative, sustainable and economically viable land use solutions to leverage the river parks system for the economic benefit to the City.
- Identify best practices and recommend sustainable funding strategies for maintenance and operation of the river parks system.

Panelists

This ULI Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) leveraged the expertise of five local industry experts to explore and address issues related to responsibly activating the riverfront along the San Marcos river:

TAP Chair	Allen Wise , IBC Bank (Local Citizen)
Land Planner	Chris Crawford , RVi Planning & Landscape Architecture
Local Environmentalist	Nick Dornak , The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment
Expert in Local Property Values	Mark Shields , Primus Real Estate (Local Citizen)
Expert on Land Development Finance	Rick Rosenberg , Development Planning & Financing Group, Inc. (DPFG)

Activating the San Marcos River Waterfront

The San Marcos River, originating from the underground Edwards Aquifer, is the crown jewel of the City of San Marcos (as captured in figure 1). It is a rare feature for a city to have such a large spring-fed river system. It is simultaneously a best-kept secret and overused. This report focuses on ways to activate the riverfront, but it is within the context of managing the current and growing number of river users with respect to surrounding natural areas and downtown.



Figure 1: San Marcos River.

Activating the riverfront does not imply more people in the river. Rather, it opens pathways for residents and visitors to move freely between downtown and the riverfront. An example of existing pedestrian opportunities on the riverfront is captured in figure 2. As tourism and population growth bring more people to San Marcos, activating the riverfront can moderate overuse of the river and protect the environment. River users would find downtown an attractive place to visit and downtown dwellers would be able to easily access riverfront amenities and discover the beauty of the river. New physical and visual connections between downtown and the riverfront would reveal a single San Marcos vision that connects downtown commerce to riverfront amenities, without adding to traffic on the river. Better visibility and usability would smooth pedestrian passage between the river and downtown, and along the river.

When discussing economic development, this report is referring to market opportunities that protect the river, such as drawing river users to downtown businesses. Using the riverfront as a natural landmark to attract out-of-town visitors to San Marcos for business meetings, conferences, and tourism can create an environment that elevates the importance of the riverfront. Ultimately, capturing revenue from river usage and downtown visitors can fund critical operations, maintenance, and conservation.

Within the above context, recommendations aim to achieve the following goals:

- Manage the current and growing number of river users by creating downtown alternatives and new uses adjacent to the river.
- Encourage river tubers to patronize downtown businesses before and after tubing.
- Enable current and prospective downtown visitors to appreciate and experience the riverfront, even if only from viewing points that overlook the river.
- Make the river and downtown a unified San Marcos experience greater than the sum of the parts.

Recommendations are intended to overcome the following challenges:

- There is no single leadership champion or visionary for the river and riverfront.
- Funding resources are limited, even for basic maintenance and safety.



Figure 2: San Marcos Riverfront

- Intense use of the river jeopardizes economic and ecosystem health, even as the riverfront is a largely hidden resource from a downtown perspective.

Recommendations (divided into the following categories) assume following environmental best practices, minimizing impact on the river, and implementing a version of the Halff Associates, Inc. plan. At the time of the panel exercise, Halff Associates, Inc. was in the process of developing a concept plan for the City to reconnect and capitalize on its riverfront parks system.

- Leadership and Marketing — One organization, one mission, all stakeholders
- Conservation/Environment — Residents and visitors protecting the heart of the city
- Land Usage and Water Usage — Enjoying the land and protecting the river
- Parking and Amenities — Creating a welcoming environment that financially benefits the City
- Safety and Maintenance — Creating a safe and clean space
- Funding — Sustainably funding maintenance and operations

Recommendations

Leadership and Marketing — One organization, one mission, all stakeholders

Many disparate groups support different aspects of the San Marcos River. Their interests and activities sometimes overlap, but they do not have a shared vision and mission, and none has clear authority.

Recommendations (detailed in the following sections):

- Create a **single non-profit** comprised of stakeholders to coordinate decisions and actions.
- Create a **single unified brand** to coordinate marketing between river, parks, and downtown.

Single Non-profit

To coordinate decisions and actions with respect to the riverfront and surrounding areas, the ULI panel recommends the creation of a single non-profit organization comprised of the various interested and affected stakeholders. The non-profit could be a local government corporation with a non-profit arm dedicated to fund raising.

The purpose of the newly created organization is for cohesive buy-in on plans, actions, and resource allocations by all partners. Broader inclusion and consensus funneled through a single entity increases the ability to maintain infrastructure and facilities throughout public areas on and off the water.

The organization's scope should be inclusive and collaborative. To that end, it should, include groups involved with or affected by the river, such as: (*Listed alphabetically with no implied priority.*)

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • A.E. Wood Fish Hatchery | • Edwards Aquifer Habitat | • San Marcos Convention & Visitor's |
| • City of San Marcos | Conservation Plan (EAHCP) permit | Bureau |
| • Council of Neighborhood | holders | • San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance |
| Associations (CONA) | • Greater San Marcos Partnership | • San Marcos Lions Club |
| • Downtown Association of San | • Local residents and businesses | • San Marcos River Foundation |
| Marcos | • Mermaid Society of Texas | • Texas Parks & Wildlife Department |
| • Edwards Aquifer Authority | • San Antonio River Authority (SARA) | • Texas State University/Meadows |
| | • San Marcos Chamber of | Center |
| | Commerce | • US Fish & Wildlife Service |

Single Brand, Coordinated Marketing

Developing a comprehensive San Marcos brand creates a unified image that encompasses downtown, the river, and the parkland connecting them. Communicating a vision of the complete package encourages seasonal users to enjoy the greater San Marcos experience and helps to distribute concentrated usage over time.

A new comprehensive San Marcos brand (such as an aquatic theme) would enable coordinated and consistent marketing between the City of San Marcos, Texas State University, San Marcos Convention and Visitors Bureau, San Marcos Chamber of Commerce, Greater San Marcos Partnership and other stakeholders.

For the single brand to be effective, the infrastructure and services behind the brand are prerequisites. At a minimum, this would include good signage and wayfinding between water, trails, downtown, parking, and services — in both directions and multiple languages. Figure 3 illustrates an example of such signage from Mission Bay, San Diego, California.



Figure 3: Coordinated marketing and signage example from Mission Bay City Park and Aquatic Playground, San Diego, CA

Image Credit: City of San Diego

Conservation/Environment — Residents and visitors protecting the heart of the city

Stakeholders interviewed by the panel agreed: conservation and protecting the environment around the San Marcos River were of utmost importance — from wildlife habitat to aquifer health. The community supports the Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan (EAHCP).¹ Texas wild rice (shown in figure 4) is appreciated as a visible and unique endangered species since it is only found in the San Marcos River headwaters; restoration progress could be made an attraction point as a means of raising the profile and importance of conservation.



Figure 4: Texas Wild Rice on San Marcos River

Photo Credit: The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment

¹ EAHCP establishes the cooperative effort to protect southern Edwards Aquifer water for people in the region, for threatened/endangered species in the Aquifer, and for aquatic spring environments with water emanating from the Aquifer. (Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan 2017 Annual Report, Blanton & Associates, March 2018)

Flooding in the area is a critical factor to consider for any changes, especially since the San Marcos River and its tributaries have created numerous flooding events in the city.

Overall, a balance must be made between enjoyment of the natural resources and managing the impact of visitors on sensitive habitats. Protecting the river is necessary for maintaining public access, and an educational component can help achieve both.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate best practices for green spaces (such as pervious cover trails) and storm water infrastructure to be prepared for and mitigate expected flooding.
- Tie the trail system into the Meadows Center, making the riverfront an ecotourism attraction more than the river itself.
- Keep riparian habitat restoration fences previously installed along the river (example shown in figure 5), possibly replacing them with more attractive fences (newer fences are designed to maintain visibility while allowing light and natural plant growth) that direct people to appropriate river access points away from sensitive areas. Removing the fences would be too high a risk of people disturbing sensitive native plantings and habitats.
- Create more defined and limited river access points with supporting infrastructure at each point.
- Add an education component along river trails, especially leading to and from the Meadows Center. Use signage to explain the importance of protecting the river and ecology, including information about the endangered Texas wild rice and the purpose of the riparian habitat restoration fences. Figure 6 illustrates an example of a riparian education signage from Redmond, Washington.



Figure 5: Existing riparian fence along San Marcos River



Figure 6: Education signage example of a riparian area

Image Credit: Bear Creek Park, Redmond, WA

Land Usage and Water Usage — Enjoying the land and protecting the river

A key to activating the San Marcos River and adjacent land is to create a single special San Marcos experience. Sustaining that experience over time depends on better distribution of river usage within the context of conservation and environmental stewardship. One goal is to lessen the impact of tubers and other users spending time in the river, just as another goal is to help people discover trails and paths into downtown. These goals are largely an issue of space and time.

The river space is mostly managed without a capacity in mind, but the capacity for people in the water seems to be at a maximum during summer. Services and maintenance struggle to keep up with the volume of people. The river is used much less during off-season times.

Goals (of water- and land-usage recommendations):

- Enable easy access to the riverfront for visitors and residents.
- Enable seamless walkability along the river, to and through downtown, with reasonable access to and from the Texas State University campus.
- Attract tubers and others spending time in the water into downtown for restaurants and retail.
- Attract downtown visitors and residents onto the trail system along the river.
- Overall, create a special experience along CM Allen Parkway that connects downtown San Marcos and the areas along the San Marcos River.

Water- and land-usage recommendations (detailed in the following sections):

- Add **pedestrian-friendly connectivity** and accessibility.
- Add and promote **land-based activities**.
- Incorporate a **cultural/ecotourism trail**.
- **Modify water-based activities** to distribute the volume of people.
- Implement a land plan and zoning district to improve **transition areas** between downtown and the river.

Pedestrian-Friendly Connectivity and Accessibility

There has been interest from the City and concerns from some members of the Texas State University administration regarding the prospect of connecting Sewell Park and City Park by trail. The connectivity would benefit both the City of San Marcos and Texas State University by providing better access for each to another part of the community. Nonetheless, it is important to protect Sewell Park as a safe campus area. For that reason, connectivity depends on maintaining the student-focused exclusivity of the Sewell Park area without compromising the University environment and upkeep of the park. That includes guiding people to stay on trails and in appropriate public areas. Refer to recommendations in the Safety and Maintenance section of this report.



Figure 7: Current view of Plaza Park

Recommendations:

- Create accessible pedestrian connections between the river and downtown with signage. Downtown pathways should continue through to trails along the river. For example, make Plaza Park into a clear gateway by removing the parking lot and some of the buildings, such as the San Marcos Area Chamber of Commerce and San Marcos Parks & Recreation Building. Current view of Plaza Park shown in figure 7.
- Make the intersection at CM Allen Parkway and Hutchison significantly more pedestrian-friendly with safer crossing options and flowering plants or other features that enhance walkability. Some of this work is already underway with the CM Allen Parkway Reconstruction Project as shown in figure 8.
- Add signage and wayfinding features to highlight and connect river trails, parks, and downtown access; show how to easily navigate between those places. East- and west-facing signage should evoke the river experience, even when returning to downtown, to achieve the overarching San Marcos River theme.
- Connect existing trails along the riverfront, especially connecting Sewell Park and City Park. (See also Safety and Maintenance recommendations.)



Figure 8: Renovations underway at CM Allen Parkway

Land-Based Activities

Introducing attractions and activities along the riverfront — between the river and downtown — is key to sustainably activating the river. Popularity and population growth will bring more people to the river, so drawing them to specific areas is crucial to safety and protecting environmentally sensitive areas.

Recommendations:

- Provide attractions or activity nodes on land (away from the water), at specific choke points. These land-based activities should have access points that are easier to manage (for safety and cleanliness) and away from riparian habitat restoration areas.
- Add or enhance pedestrian-friendly trails with educational trail markers and activities. Introduce a Cultural/Ecotourism Trail with trail markers as educational points of interest (described below).
- Incorporate public art, similar to the existing mermaid statues (example shown in figure 9), along the river trail network and paths to and through downtown.
- Encourage or sponsor off-season community activities along the riverfront and trail network.
- Designate an area for barbecuing and picnicking on the south side of Cheatham Street from Rio Vista Park. This mitigates or shifts the congestion and active environment at Rio Vista that disturbs nearby residents.



Figure 9: Existing mermaid statue

Photo Credit: Lauren Volpe, City of San Marcos

Cultural/Ecotourism Trail

Creating a cultural/ecotourism trail system with educational trail markers and activities can magnify the benefits and draw of the trail system. Adding environmental education will promote care and respect for the river, creating a more manageable culture for park rangers and other maintenance staff.

Recommendations:

- Establish a cultural trail with clear entry points and signage that make it an obvious and special attraction that is separate from the river itself. Points of interest can include cultural information with local history.
- Make ecotourism a theme throughout the trail system and downtown, including signage. (Refer to Conservation/Environment recommendations for details about the Meadows Center, Texas wild rice, and other ecological factors.)
- Make a clear arrival and gateway along Hopkins Street, from the area near Dog Park and San Marcos City Hall all the way to the river.

Water-Based Activity Changes

Beyond adding land-based activities, the panel recommends modifying water-based activities to better distribute the volume of people. Generally, limit the number of entry points to focus recreation between and away from conservation areas. Part of the solution could include enhancing existing entry points and better directing people to those locations.

Recommendations:

- Establish kayak and other water activity entry points in a separate location from Lions Club Tube Rental.
- Establish family-friendly entry points for swimming, similar to Sewell Park, in a separate location from Lions Club Tube Rental.

An option for later consideration is to move the Lions Club Tube Rental river entry, likely less feasible so soon after recent renovations. The current location is very conducive to land-based community uses that would relieve overflow of people on the water, including recreation space for tube renters. The Lions Club shuttle provides flexibility to relocate along the river, possibly a new building in Ramon Lucio Park (currently home to several baseball fields).

Transition Zone

Activating the river is a direct function of the transition areas between downtown and the river. When considering the different nature of those spaces, it is important to consider whether downtown and river dwellers are different or overlapping audiences. Will river dwellers have breakfast tacos downtown before going to the Lions Club Tube Rental and into the river, then return for lunch/dinner/shopping and a more complete San Marcos experience? Will downtown dwellers explore the trails of the riverfront, possibly renting tubes and kayaks if they are in town for an overnight stay?

Implementing a zoning district with incentives to improve transition areas would help create a unified San Marcos experience for both audiences, whether they start downtown or in the river.

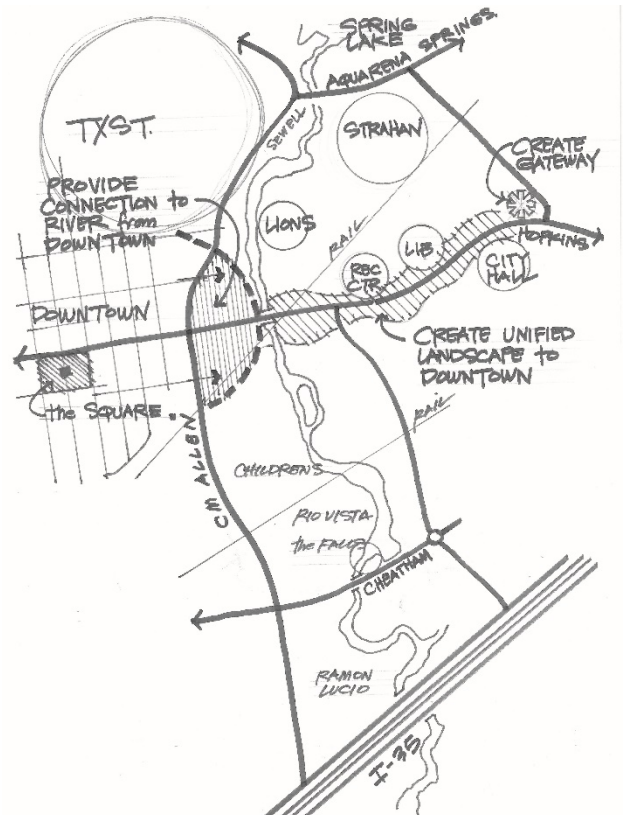


Figure 10: Sketch illustrating possible transition zones.

Image Credit: Chris Crawford, RVI Landscape Architecture + Planning

Recommendations:

- Develop a master plan to create a transition zone between the river and downtown for the intersection at CM Allen Parkway and Hutchison Street, possibly down to Hopkins Street. The transition zone creates a park-like setting that attracts people downtown for walking, shopping, and dining. Pedestrian crossing should be safe, contiguous, and inviting, emphasizing the river theme developed as part of the comprehensive San Marcos brand. If feasible, clear some buildings in this area. This master plan would serve as a focused overlay district, adjacent to San Marcos Plaza Park. It creates an edge to the park over one block, and the market will blend the zone into downtown over time. Refer to figure 10 for an illustration of possible transition zones. Tie the overlay district into the downtown master plan update by including it in the Halff Associates, Inc. river plan.
- Create an area with different zoning and financial incentives along the west side of CM Allen Parkway, from Broadway Bank at University to Interstate-35, and along Hutchison Street (for river approach) and Hopkins Street. Use incentives, such as tax deferral mechanisms or rebates, to facilitate creation of a cultural trail along Hopkins Street. For example, offer tax abatement through a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) to attract investment and encourage redevelopment. Or, consider using a Public Improvement District (PID) to encourage tourism-related businesses, such as restaurants with outdoor patio dining. This helps link downtown to the parks.

Parking and Amenities — Create a welcoming environment that financially benefits the City

The people of San Marcos may be warm and welcoming, but lack of visibility and access between city and river do not encourage people to experience the city beyond their initial reasons for visiting, whether for enjoying the river or for business. Ideally, people on the water would want to stay and spend time downtown. Business users would be attracted to the city for its beautiful riverfront. Residents would feel welcome in their own town — and welcoming to visitors. At this time the panel is not recommending adding a hotel downtown. In the future, with increased riverfront activities and amenities, the area may become viable for adding more downtown lodging.

Fixing the parking problem and adding certain amenities will create a more welcoming San Marcos for residents and visitors.

Parking

Downtown and river parking were the most common concerns among those interviewed by the panel. The prevalence of free parking in San Marcos eliminates the ability to control it. People park where they are not welcome, or in inconvenient locations, or they cannot find parking at all. Free parking eliminates a funding opportunity common in other cities. As a critical aspect of living in San Marcos, and as the first experience visitors have upon arriving, parking should set the stage for the city to be a welcoming place to live and visit. The panel recommends strategically charging for parking and providing offsite parking.

Recommendations:

- Extend parking times allowed (paid or free), so people have time to swim, shop, and linger in town. This ensures visitors will feel comfortable parking, and residents can spend time in town for errands.
- Implement a system to charge for parking downtown and along the river, even if it includes less expensive or subsidized parking for residents. It is important to stop providing free parking because it limits parking for all. Neighborhood residential permits can be used to reserve parking for people who live in the area.

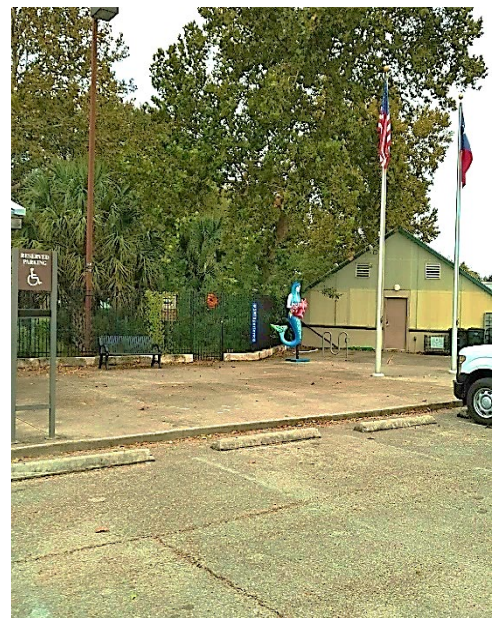


Figure 11: Paid parking opportunity.

- Require paid parking at the lots near river parks. Figure 11 depicts a paid parking opportunity at a river park near downtown.
- Allocate to park use (such as maintenance and rangers) all parking revenue from within river parks.
- Allocate to park use a specified percentage of parking revenue from a downtown parks-benefit district.
- Add wayfinding signage (bilingual) that directs people to appropriate parking in or near downtown if parking in the river parks is full. Incorporate parking into plans for pedestrian-friendly connectivity.
- Offer an offsite park-and-ride option with shuttles. This could be in cooperation with Texas State University or Lions Club Tubing Rental. The Lions Club shuttle could pass through downtown, presenting an opportunity for tubing visitors to see and visit downtown.

Amenities

People visiting San Marcos for a specific purpose, such as tubing on the river or business meetings, may want to stay beyond that initial purpose. Adding certain amenities between the river and downtown will enable those visitors to participate more in the local economy.

Recommendations:

- Add restrooms at Plaza Park that also can be used as changing areas, with consideration for flood zone development, especially sewage associated with restrooms.
- Add changing areas at Lions Club Tube Rental and other locations to enable tourists to change clothes before or after tubing, so they can dine and shop downtown. Showers are not necessary.
- Add aquatic-themed benches on the trails. Attractive art-covered seating can build on the river theme, strengthening the view that the San Marcos River and downtown are part of the same experience.
- Add flexible spaces that support a variety of events. Develop Plaza Park into a successful event space, and then add other spaces.
- Add shaded areas for summer activities.

Safety and Maintenance — Creating a safe and clean space

As use of the river grows, with or without changes, safety and maintenance become higher priorities. Both factors raise the importance of finding funding sources. The panel's recommendations in these areas focus on basic safety and cleanliness needs throughout the riverfront parks, but also on preventing underfunding in the future.

Safety Concerns

Residents and visitors must feel safe and comfortable in the riverfront parks and downtown, even before activating the river to be more part of the San Marcos scene. It is critical to pedestrian-friendly connectivity, and visitors will be more likely to return after having a great experience.

Smooth management of the large and varied volume of people enjoying the San Marcos River has an impact on the ability and willingness of stakeholders to work together. It strengthens the trust between the City of San Marcos and Texas State University to create a contiguous San Marcos experience.

Recommendations:

- Increase park staffing, especially park rangers, to consistently enforce rules, such as those shown in figure 12.
- Change park hours to close one-half hour after sunset. Current park hours are 6:00 AM to 11:00 PM, but there is effectively no limit due to numerous access points and limited resources to oversee.
- Use improved security to enable Texas State University to work with the City to establish trail connections between Sewell Park and City Park. (Refer to Pedestrian-Friendly Connectivity recommendations.)

- Include adequate access for police and fire departments in the Halff Associates, Inc. master plan.

Maintenance

Lack of funding is a primary obstacle to maintaining parks along the riverfront. While establishing funding sources is part of the solution, planning for future funding needs can ensure ongoing success.

Recommendations:

- Use the Halff Associates, Inc. parks concept plan and planning for the transition areas between downtown and the river to target a desired standard. Use dedicated funding sources and staff to maintain that standard.
- Add more staff to keep the park clean and safe.
- Do not accept donations of parkland without a mechanism to fund operations and maintenance. Suggest cash in lieu, that can be used to maintain parks.

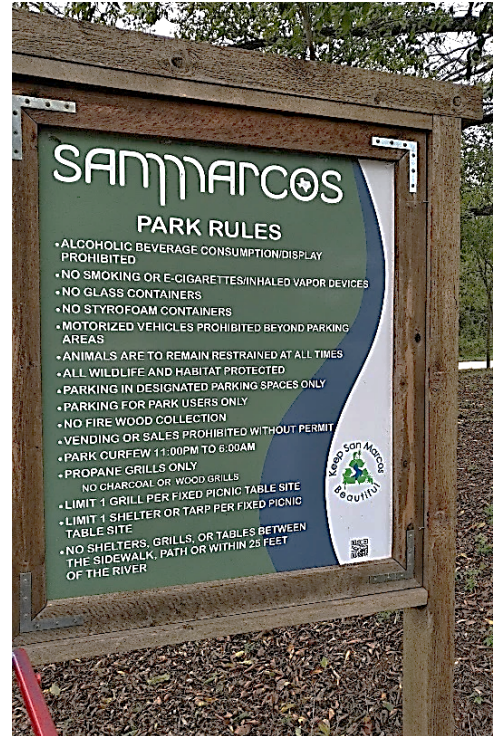


Figure 12: San Marcos park rules

Funding — Sustainably funding maintenance and operations

There is inadequate funding (amount and predictability) to manage the riverfront as it is or to achieve all the goals that support activating the San Marcos River. The City relies on limited General Fund revenues for maintenance and operation of the river parks system. Feedback suggests modifying the approach to parking fees, Lions Club Tube Rental, and Sights & Sounds of Christmas Festival are parts of the solution.

Stakeholders and interviewees appreciate the value of the Lions Club Tube Rental to the City and to the many community organizations it supports. The recommendations seek to maintain City support of Lions Club with a better balance of the significant costs to the City and the impact of such operations on the river. Resulting improvements and benefits to the City will benefit Lions Club operations accordingly.

These funding recommendations are intended to address financial problems that cause degradation of the most cherished natural resource in San Marcos.

Recommendations:

- Hire a consultant to help train the new local government corporation non-profit leadership on how to fundraise. (Refer to Leadership and Marketing recommendations.)
- Restructure the Sights & Sounds of Christmas Festival agreement to share revenue in a way that covers costs to the City, at a minimum.
- Restructure the Lions Club Tube Rental agreement to generate at least enough revenue to cover costs to the City. First, do a cost analysis of Lions Club riverfront use that includes resulting City services, including parking, trash removal, park rangers, other security requirements, and watershed protection. Then, determine an equitable revenue share between City and Lions Club. Determine how much of Lions Club Tube Rental revenue should be directed to the river and the riverfront.
- Consider using funds from restructured agreements with Lions Club and Sights & Sounds Festival to offer direct incentives via loans or grants under Chapter 380 of the Local Government Code² for improvements in

² Texas Local Government Code, Title 12 Planning and Development, Chapter 380
(<https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/LG/htm/LG.380.htm>).

the transition zone recommended in this report. These surplus funds can be made available to the relevant entity through a Section 380 Economic Development Grant by the City or other legally permissible economic development incentive program.

- Adopt a City policy that prevents subsidizing third-party events and activities, especially those that involve excess cost to the City. Include revenue sharing between the City and third-party organizations.

Conclusions: A Vision for Activation

The natural beauty of the river, as captured in figure 13, is one of San Marcos' most valuable assets. However, with the current separation between river and downtown, the City is not fully leveraging the potential of this unique natural resource and the river suffers consequences of neglect and overuse.

With tourism and population growth bringing more people to San Marcos, activating the riverfront can moderate or re-distribute water traffic and protect the environment. River users would find downtown an attractive place to visit. Likewise, downtown residential development and the ability to recruit businesses to downtown may become more attractive due to the proximity of the river and riverfront amenities.

The ULI panel recommendations aim to activate the riverfront in a way that makes San Marcos better for residents while using the riverfront to attract visitors to San Marcos for business meetings, conferences, and tourism. That can create an environment that elevates the importance of the riverfront. Capturing revenue from river usage and downtown visitors can fund operations, maintenance, and conservation.



Figure 13: San Marcos River.

Moving forward, certain challenges could impede implementation of recommendations:

- Finding or forming a single leadership champion takes time, but it is an important step.
- There has been long-standing resistance to changing current agreements and practices (related to parking, Lions Club Tube Rental, and river use) that could be better leveraged to produce ongoing funding sources.
- There might be a misperception of river activation as an effort to increase development and the number of people, even though recommendations are intended to relieve overuse of the river.

A summary of recommendations follows.

Leadership and Marketing — One organization, one mission, all stakeholders

- Create a single non-profit comprised of stakeholders to coordinate decisions and actions.
- Create a single unified San Marcos brand, with focus on the river and park system.
- Coordinate marketing strategy to encompass the river, parks, and downtown.

Conservation/Environment — Residents and visitors protecting the heart of the city

- Incorporate best practices for green spaces and storm water infrastructure to mitigate flooding.
- Tie the trail system into Meadows Center, making the riverfront an ecotourism attraction.

- Enhance riparian habitat restoration fences along the river and direct people to more appropriate and limited access points.
- Add an education component along river trails to explain the importance of protecting the river.

Land Usage and Water Usage — Enjoying the land and protecting the river

- Add pedestrian-friendly connectivity and accessibility.
- Add and promote land-based activities.
- Modify water-based activities to distribute the volume of people.
- Incorporate a cultural/ecotourism trail.
- Create arrival sequence along Hopkins Street from the City Hall area to the river and downtown.
- Implement a special zoning district to improve transition areas between downtown and the river.

Parking and Amenities — Creating a welcoming environment

- Strategically charge for parking.
- Provide offsite parking with shuttles.
- Add amenities, including restrooms, changing areas, aquatic-themed benches, and flexible event spaces.

Safety and Maintenance — Creating a safe and clean space

- Increase park staffing, especially more park rangers, to keep the park clean and safe.
- Change park hours to close one-half hour after sunset.
- Include adequate access for police and fire departments in the master plans.
- Use the master plans to target a desired maintenance standard, then fund and staff accordingly for maintenance.
- Do not accept donations of parkland without a mechanism to fund operations and maintenance.

Funding — Affording maintenance and sustainable operation

- Hire a consultant to train the local government corporation non-profit leadership on how to fundraise.
- Restructure Sights & Sounds of Christmas Festival agreement to generate enough revenue to cover costs.
- Restructure Lions Club Tube Rental agreement to generate at least enough revenue to cover costs to the City and direct those funds to the operation and maintenance of the river and the riverfront.
- Use funds from restructured agreements to offer direct incentives under Government Code Chapter 380.
- Adopt a City policy that prevents subsidizing third-party events that cost the City. Include revenue sharing.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the stakeholders who participated in interview sessions to provide critical insight to local nuances. The ULI Panelists interviewed over 50 people. Additional community leaders were invited, but not all were able to participate (contact Austin@uli.org for a comprehensive list of all who were invited). The following organizations provided input:

City of San Marcos:

- City Council
- City Manager's Office
- Parks & Recreation
- Economic Development Board
- Finance Department
- Fire Department
- Main Street
- Parking Management
- Planning & Development Services
- Police Department

Greater San Marcos Partnership

Texas State University:

- Texas State University Administration
- Texas State University Facilities
- Texas State University Planning

A.E. Wood Fish Hatchery

Austin Parks Foundation

Austin Trail Foundation

Carson Properties

City of Greenville, South Carolina

Corridor Title

Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA)

Downtown Association of San Marcos

Edwards Aquifer Authority

Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan

Halff Associates, Inc.

Hays County Development Services Department

Ivar's Restaurant

Local Hotel Operators

Olympic Outdoor Center

PaddleSMTX

San Marcos Chamber of Commerce

San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance

San Marcos Lions Club

San Marcos River Foundation

The Catfish Hunter

TX Parks & Wildlife Dept

US Fish & Wildlife Service

The findings and recommendations provided in this report are based on the collective expertise of the panel, coupled with briefing materials provided by the sponsoring organizations, and stakeholder interviews and discussions conducted during the two-day panel exercise.

Appendix A
Courtesy City of San Marcos





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