

News from the Helotes Heritage Association

Dear Readers,

The GEAA has sent the following great news regarding protection of lands and recharge features associated with the Edwards Aquifer. HHA commends the Hays County Commissioners for their leadership in this action.

Sincerely,
Ron Green, President
Helotes Heritage Association

Hays spends \$3 million to preserve Jacob's Well

By Jacob Cottingham

Hays County Commissioners unanimously approved \$3 million Tuesday towards preserving Jacob's Well in Wimberley. Saving the popular swimming hole and aquifer feature has been an important cause to many, not the least of which is the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association (WVWA). The issue drew a packed audience to the court, several of whom spoke in favor of the motion.

Jacobs Well is an artesian spring and home of the largest underground water cave in the state. The WVWA's Jacob's Well Project will utilize the funds to preserve 55 acres that surround the spring. The money will be contingent upon the WVWA meeting certain benchmarks. Of the funds, \$2.6 million will go directly to the WVWA while \$400,000 will be paid to a new non-profit entity charged with managing the property and the project.

The memo of understanding by County Judge Liz Sumter directs the WVWA to resolve any outstanding legal issues with the property, remove all liens on the project, turn over financial statements to the county for review and establishing a non-profit Jacob's Well Natural Area Trust to operate and manage the land as well as attendant educational programs. The county and the WVWA will take part in writing the founding articles of JWNAT and have equal appointment powers to its board. A third, agreed-upon entity to be decided later, will also have the authority to appoint a board member.

There will be nine initial board members. The memo expires in October of 2008. Pct. 1 Commissioner Jeff Barton told the court they had a contingency plan in the unexpected event that the agreement falls apart – though it is expected to be completed by June at the latest. The memo ensures that there will be recreational provisions in the final plan for the well.

David Baker, executive director of the WVWA, said the group was founded in 1996, and told the court "the action you take today is the culmination of much of that effort." Baker referred to Jacob's Well as the "canary in the coal mine" and implied that the future of other aquifer conservation efforts in the county would be aided by this resolution.

Baker told the court, "The memo of understanding before us today is one of the most significant steps toward protecting one of the most significant sites in the entire Hill Country. It protects the aquifer, the spring flow and this very sensitive region that's important not just to those who live in the immediate area, but to the entire county." The four commissioners all had glowing remarks for the WVWA and the future of Jacob's Well.