



YFFY YOSSFIFOR yjossifor@star-telegram.com

A railroad bridge is nestled inside Palo Pinto Mountains State Park. Creating a new park and maintaining existing ones takes the Legislature's commitment and generous donations, but Palo Pinto Mountains park is on its way.

COMMENTARY

New Palo Pinto state park gives us a chance to celebrate Texas' majestic outdoors

BY ANNE BROWN



Texas is blessed with an incredible diversity of ecosystems that are the foundation of the lands, waters and wildlife we cherish. From the Panhandle plains to the coastal prairies, and from the desert landscape of far West Texas to the Pineywoods of East Texas, our state is rich with natural treasures that feed our souls.

A network of local, state and national parks provide places for us to escape the asphalt and concrete of cities for respite in nature. But these recreational areas represent less than 5% of the land in Texas. As our population continues to grow rapidly, the pressure on public lands is stronger than ever.

The pandemic has underscored the incredible value of our public green spaces. As COVID-19 upended our normal routines and restricted our activities, we saw a huge demand for access to public parkland and renewed appreciation for the

outdoors. We recognized again the importance of outdoor spaces for keeping our minds and bodies healthy.

The need to invest in our parks, both the historic ones we visited as children and those that have yet to open, is more important than ever. Creating new parks and stewarding existing parks is a priority for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, which oversees the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The department's chief executive, Carter Smith, has been leading our state park system since 2008, weathering hurricanes, droughts, ice storms and seven legislative sessions along the way.

In 2019, the Legislature authorized \$12.5 million for development of the newest state park in North Texas in more than 25 years — Palo Pinto Mountains State Park. The appropriation came with a commitment that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation would raise \$9 million in private funds to bring the park to life.

The foundation is well on its way to reaching that goal, and construction on park facilities will commence next year.

The public-private partnership to

provide transformational outdoor experiences for Texans exemplifies the future of land acquisition and conservation in our state. Even with the commitment of sporting-goods sales taxes for state parks, there remains a huge need for private money to meet the outdoor recreation demands of our fast-growing population.

The 2014 acquisition of Powderhorn Ranch by the parks foundation is another example of this public-private approach to ensuring all Texans can experience our state's valued wild things and inspiring wild places.

The ranch's remaining acreage was recently donated to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for creation of a state park. Powderhorn Ranch is one of the largest remaining tracts of unspoiled coastal prairie in Texas, and, thanks to this incredible partnership effort, it will be available to the people of Texas for generations to come.

My long-term involvement with both of these legacy projects has been deeply gratifying. When I left the corporate world decades ago to direct my time and energy to conservation, it was for my own individual connection with the outdoors and my intellectual understanding that we all need healthy lands and waters to thrive.

Once I became a mother, that connection deepened. I hope to spend the rest of my career ensuring that my son, and the next generation, has access to these outdoor treasures.

With the generosity of many donors, we expect to begin construction of Palo Pinto Mountains State Park in late 2022, which will lead into a year-long campaign in 2023 celebrating 100 years of Texas state parks. We will encourage all Texans to explore what our state parks mean to them, today and for the next 100 years.

A century of providing access to the places that mean so much seems like a long time, but it's really only a grandchild away. I invite all Texans to join in appreciating our parks, by visiting and experiencing all they have to offer.

If you feel moved by your park experiences, get engaged in making sure others can have them, too. As the department likes to say: "Life's better outside."

Anne Brown, a former executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, is the project lead for the foundation's Palo Pinto Mountains State Park project and the State Parks Centennial.