



November 26, 2018

Mayor Adler and Members of the Austin City Council,

Environment Texas wants to offer our strong endorsement for the Water Forward plan, and we urge you to vote to approve it. As the Council knows, this plan was developed through collaboration between Austin Water Utility and the Water Forward Task Force. That panel was created by the Council in 2014 in response to a recommendation from [a previous panel](#) which included Luke Metzger, the Executive Director of Environment Texas, among its members. Because of this connection, we have closely followed the development of the Water Forward plan and have eagerly awaited its adoption.

At the Council's November 12th work session, Task Force Chair Sharlene Leurig described Water Forward as "the most important water plan in the United States today, because it proposes that Austin will live with the water it already has." Environment Texas agrees with this assessment of the plan's significance.

Historically, most western U.S. cities have acquired more water by purchasing and transporting it from areas that supposedly don't need it. Not only will this become increasingly expensive as more cities compete for the same finite resource, it can also cause substantial environmental damage to the areas where the water is removed. In particular, wildlife and fish suffer when the water level drops below normal in rivers, lakes, and bays.

Water Forward is built on a recognition that Austin can already draw enough water from the Colorado River for its future growth, if we only use what we have more wisely. The plan doesn't rely on one big solution, but instead on multiple solutions that can be grouped into three broad categories — conservation, re-use, and storage.

- The conservation solutions include the installation of "smart meters" to let customers monitor their water usage, and switching landscapes from water-thirsty non-native plants to drought-tolerant Texas natives.
- The re-use solutions are based on the idea that potable water isn't necessary for some needs, such as flushing toilets or watering lawns. For these needs, buildings will be encouraged to collect and re-use onsite water resources such as air conditioning condensate, and to hook up to the city's reclaimed water system.
- The storage solutions will help us capture the rain that falls during wet months and hold it for use during dry months. Rainwater harvesting systems can collect small amounts of runoff on an individual lot, while an aquifer storage and recovery system can collect large amounts and hold this water in an underground reservoir, which doesn't suffer from evaporation loss the way that a surface-level reservoir does.

By embracing all of Water Forward's recommendations, Austin will have enough water to accommodate a population that's projected to grow from 1 million to 4 million over the next 100 years. We will also be better equipped to cope with the booms and busts of water availability that are becoming more severe due to climate change.

In addition, Water Forward's recommendations will help Austin start using "One Water" planning, also known as integrated water management. Like most cities, Austin has historically assigned responsibility for a particular aspect of water to a particular department. The One Water approach looks at all forms of water — drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and natural water — as different aspects of a single resource that should be managed in a comprehensive way in order to produce

multiple benefits. For example, capturing stormwater doesn't just create a new water supply, but can also help reduce flooding, erosion, and runoff pollution.

While Water Forward takes many steps in the right direction, Environment Texas believes that Austin can do even more. The plan focuses on only one water management goal — increasing supply. By incorporating other goals, such as improving water quality in our streams and lakes, the plan can produce co-benefits that will help justify the higher cost of some of its recommendations. This holistic approach will also help Austin integrate its overlapping planning processes, since Water Forward and the ongoing revision of the city's Land Development Code cover some of the same ground.

For example, the city's Watershed Protection Department has already proposed that new construction should use green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) features, including rain harvesting, to meet their water quality requirements. This proposal could easily be combined with Water Forward's recommendation that rain harvesting be included in new construction, since a development that installs a rain harvesting system would be well on the way to meeting its water quality requirements. As Environment Texas has explained in two reports — [“Swim At Your Own Risk”](#) and [“Texas Stormwater Scorecard”](#) — widespread use of GSI features in Austin could help reduce the runoff pollution that has made most of the city's creeks unsafe for swimming.

And while Water Forward contains several excellent recommendations for reducing water usage, we believe that consumption can be reduced even further by changing Austin's development code to allow for more compact housing units to be built. According to a statistic from Austin Water Utility included in our [“Growing Greener”](#) report, a housing unit in a multifamily building can use up to one-third less water than a single-family house on an average lot.

Water Forward's recommendations are only recommendations at this point. But we believe that they are well-studied and well-supported, which is why we're urging the Council to approve this plan. The city's staff should then immediately begin the work of turning these recommendations into concrete policies that will ensure Austin's water supply and protect our future.

Sincerely,



Brian Zabcik  
Clean Water Advocate, Environment Texas



Luke Metzger  
Executive Director, Environment Texas