

# URBANWATERS

## FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

*Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities*

## San Antonio River Watershed (Bexar County, Texas)



### **Ambassador**

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## Overall Assessment of the Partnership Since the Beginning

The Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) began in 2011 to promote collaboration between federal agencies and local partners in urban communities with the goal of restoring waterways. Around this time, the San Antonio River Authority (SARA) had partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the City of San Antonio, Bexar County, and the San Antonio River Foundation to restore 10 miles of the San Antonio River through the San Antonio Missions National Park, and SARA realized their work shared the same goals as those of the UWFP. This realization sparked discussions between the City of San Antonio, Bexar County, SARA, the San Antonio Housing Authority, and the San Antonio Water System about how they could become part of the partnership and increase the pace of improvements in local waterways. In 2013, local partners met with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Housing and Urban Development to help bring this idea to fruition. Their application was submitted and approved in 2014 as one of the 19 designated locations across the United States, making San Antonio the only city to apply to become part of the partnership. While the partners are quite diverse, they all have common goals—to work together to improve water quality in the San Antonio River basin within Bexar County and to revitalize the community’s relationship with their local waterways.

In October 2015, the San Antonio UWFP welcomed Perla Alarcon, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Fellow working with the San Antonio Metropolitan Health Department, as the location's Ambassador. UWFP Ambassadors serve as coordinators, facilitators, and reporters, providing support in both strategic planning and project implementation. One goal of the Ambassador program is to accelerate and prioritize on-the-ground projects that are critical to improving water quality, restoring outdoor spaces, and fostering community stewardship in urban watersheds.

Nationally, the UWFP seeks to reconnect urban communities, particularly those that are underserved, with their waterways by improving coordination among federal agencies and collaborating with community-led revitalization efforts to improve the nation's water systems and promote their economic, environmental, and social benefits. Specifically, the partnership will:

- Break down federal program silos to promote more efficient and effective use of federal resources through better coordination and targeting of federal investments.
- Recognize and build on local efforts and leadership by engaging and serving community partners.
- Engage and empower community members.
- Work with local officials and effective community-based organizations to leverage area resources and stimulate local economies to create local jobs.
- Learn from early and visible victories to fuel long-term action.

## Members of the Partnership

The local Urban Waters partnership consists of a variety of local and regional agencies and organizations. As each affiliation works to uphold the overall mission and goals of the federal partnership, they also work to uphold their own organizations' objectives, thus making intergovernmental collaboration an essential component to the success of the partnership. The local Ambassador, serving as coordinator, facilitator, and reporter, works to keep local partners and stakeholders informed on both national and local Urban Waters-related projects and resources through:

- Information regarding local and national Urban Waters-related workshops, as well as partner and stakeholder meetings and events
- Email threads and Listserv

## Partnership Meetings and Workshops

The San Antonio partnership has found that hosting informational workshops in conjunction with Urban Waters forums holds more opportunities for engagement and networking for local project leads and stakeholders. Results from an Urban Waters Federal Grants post-workshop survey indicated that a substantial number of workshop attendees found their experience to be beneficial and more than half would highly consider recommending the workshop to colleagues (Figure 1).

**On a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, how likely are you to recommend this workshop to a colleague?**

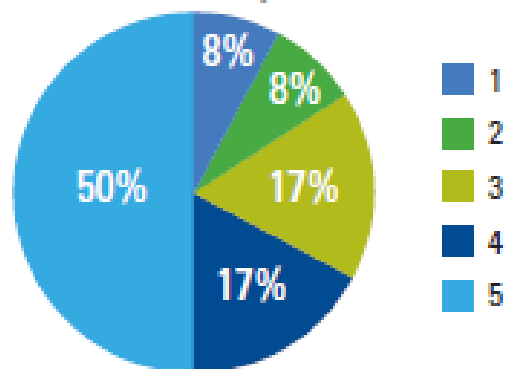


Figure 1

The local Ambassador has shifted the recruitment focus and has begun connecting to community organizations, non-governmental organizations, informal community groups, neighborhood associations, educators, and concerned citizens that share common interests with active Urban Waters stakeholders. The partnership hopes to continually connect all participating partners and develop strong and diverse coalitions, essential to strong requests for funding and support, and to properly leverage available resources.

## Nature of the Partnership

Members of SARA and the City of San Antonio have been an integral force in building and sustaining connections between local partners. SARA continuously provides the Ambassador with educational and networking opportunities, as well as general support with Urban Waters-related workshops, reporting, and events.

The Westside Creeks Restoration Oversight Committee (WCROC) consists of two co-chairs and representatives of 20 local community organizations that were approved by the SARA Board of Directors. WCROC facilitates the gathering of ideas, existing plans, and community input into the Westside Creeks Restoration Project.

The San Pedro Creek Restoration Subcommittee came into fruition after a separate comprehensive plan was conceptualized by city and public stakeholders alike. Unlike the WCROC that meets bimonthly, the San Pedro Creek Subcommittee meets monthly. Committee members receive the latest updates on design plans, learn about opportunities for economic development in conjunction with the revitalization process, and provide comments and input.

The Choice Neighborhood Initiative holds monthly “Neighborhood Coffee” community meetings where committee members, stakeholders, and residents receive the latest information on neighborhood revival plans, including the development of the Garcia Urban Farm and the revitalized Menger Creek and its adjacent hike and bike trails.

“Water is life. What we are doing with water in Bexar County and San Antonio is bringing more life, better life to the city.”

- Judge Paul Elizondo, Precinct 2, Bexar County Commissioner

## Major Actions Planned in the Future

Local partners and stakeholders support improvements in the quality of urban waters and access to open space as a catalyst for economic development. Additionally, the local partnership acknowledges the need for investment to be placed back into the neighborhoods that are generating the revenue for these businesses. Social enterprise is essential to a prosperous community. Partners also suggested the partnership pinpoint where the “connection” within the community went missing, whether it is a physical disconnection, a social/perceived disconnection, or both.

Economic development that connects local, underserved communities with their local waterways is the partnership’s top priority. Future development along these corridors should prioritize public security, direct access to creekways, and sustainable development. Additionally, future development must adhere to preservation guidelines specific to areas along historic and native lands. Culturally-sensitive development is key, particularly in neighborhoods with heavy intergenerational investment that have been substantially disenfranchised over the years.

Ecotourism, or development that is conscious of the natural environmental and possible health hazards that can directly affect communities in areas connected to the river, is the most effective way to gain community buy-in.

SARA works with several developers to provide incentives for those who choose to practice sustainable development and Best Management Practices. Wheatley Courts, part of the Choice Neighborhood Initiative, has already implemented sustainable development practices strategies within renovated housing complexes in their neighborhood. Additional funds have also been sought to expand existing linear walkways, with the intent of providing additional access to open spaces while still maintaining the floodplain and its ecologically-restored functions.

Developing environmental stewardship at a young age is also an important component to fostering long term sustainability. Young children will become adults who will then advocate for the importance of improving water quality and develop partnerships like the Urban Waters Federal Partnership. Several partners have expressed interest in pinpointing current environmental educational educators and programs that could benefit from the partnership's support.

The local Ambassador will continue to be a focal point in supporting local partners and stakeholders. Collaboration between stakeholders and the local Ambassador will continue to develop naturally and as needed. Local stakeholders regularly approach the local Ambassador for support regarding opportunities that offer the potential to leverage existing resources and collaborate with other entities with common goals and objectives.

## **Major Challenges in the Future**

Rebuilding trust between community members and local city leaders will be challenging but necessary to encourage residents to engage in Urban Waters workshops and events, and to collect productive feedback on projects and initiatives that project leads can be receptive to.

Currently, workplans and factsheets detailing the San Antonio River Basin focus on specific projects that have been supported by the partnership, creating the illusion of exclusivity. Shifting to a more thematic narrative, with a focus on goals and objectives the partnership wishes to accomplish, would encourage additional stakeholders to assess where their priorities overlap with the partnership and contact the partnership for support. The partnership hopes to effectively communicate that this coalition between various agencies and organizations of all levels provides opportunity to access resources, technical assistance, and training. Several partners stressed that a stronger community voice, as well as the topic of environmental justice, was missing from the conversation.

Below are themes the local partnership feels should be prioritized:

<u>Group 1 – Education on Water Quality and the Natural Environment</u>	<u>Group 2 – Restoring Watersheds and Improving Community Engagement</u>	<u>Group 3 – Economic Development and Revitalization</u>
Provide engagement and education opportunities for the San Antonio community regarding infrastructure and access to the natural environment	Engaging San Antonio through local partnerships to educate and inspire action, while focusing on concentration and water quality as a local value with national benefits	Widespread neighborhood enhancement through collaboration and community engagement, ecotourism, and improving access to neighborhood amenities and historic staples from Mission Reach