

APPENDIX F-RECREATION

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Wharton, TX lies southwest of Houston in the region referred to as the Gulf Prairie. (Figure 1.1) The City was founded as the county seat of Wharton County in 1846, and lies approximately 55 miles from downtown Houston, 30 miles southwest of Sugarland, 142 miles from Austin, 173 miles from San Antonio and 200 miles from Corpus Christi. The city's location between major metropolitan areas and its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico (45 miles) are important factors to consider in recreational planning. Tourists interested in both freshwater and saltwater recreation travel through this area, which is also rich in historical and cultural amenities, since it is part of the original land grant offered to Texas' Founding Father, Stephen F. Austin.



The entire city (*Figure 1.2*) is sited within the 500-year floodplain and surrounded by farmlands, predominantly under rice production. The Colorado River runs on the southwestern edge of the city. Caney Creek (once called Canebrake Creek) runs through the middle of the city and was once the main part of the Colorado River bed. Most of Caney Creek has been altered by development and damming, and does not sustain a year-round flow; however, during high rainfall periods and flood stages of the Colorado River, Caney Creek also floods. (*Figure 1.3*) Peach Creek and Baughman Slough lies to the north of the city, and due to the mild terrain of the area, flooding stages of these creeks also affect the city. The Wharton Municipal Airport is within the FAA's restricted 5-mile radius zone and is approximately two-miles from the city of Wharton.

Figure 1.2 City of Wharton, Texas

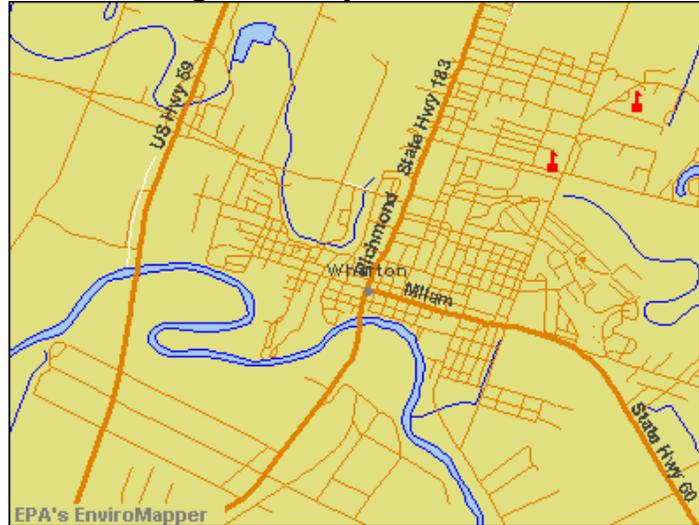


Figure 1.3 View of Caney Creek, Wharton, TX



REGIONAL INFORMATION

Man has inhabited Wharton County since the Late Prehistoric period more than 10,000 years ago. Prior to European-American settlement, the area was occupied by the Karankawa Indians, and frequented by the Tonkawa tribes. (By 1850, the tribes moved into Mexico to escape the increasing skirmishes and conflicts with European-American settlers. European settlement began with the early explorations of Spanish explorers, including René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle (1687), Alonso De León (1688 and 1689), Martin de Alarcón (1718), Pedro de Rivera y Villalón (1727), and Prudensio Orobio y Basterra (1745 and 1746). The main travel routes used

county's demographic composition is approximately 55% Anglo, 30% Hispanic and 15% African-American.

Farming and ranching have been the dominant industries of the county since settlement. The Pierce Estate Ranch and the J. D. Hudgins Ranch are located within the county. Both ranches were prominent in the establishment of the Brahman cattle market in the United States. Wharton County was once part of the "Texas Sugar Bowl", and contained several sugar cane plantations. Rice and cotton replaced sugar cane, and today Wharton County is one of the top rice producing counties in Texas. The eastern portions of the county are known for pecan and peach production; the western portion is a major watermelon production area.

RAILROADS

Railroads were a major factor in the growth of the county, as towns were established following the various rail routes. Today, most of the rail lines have been removed except for the original Buffalo Bayou, Brazos & Colorado (B,B,B & C) line that was established in 1859.

MINING

Mineral extraction has been a predominant industry throughout the county since 1904, and included oil, gas and sulphur extraction; Newgulf, a company town, was established in 1925 to mine sulphur at Boling Dome. Under ownership of the Texas Gulf Sulphur Company, Newgulf produced 80 million tons of sulphur before closing in 1993. It was the largest sulphur production site in the world. The company town of Newgulf was dismantled in 1993 and is now a "ghost town".

TOURISM AND RECREATION

HERITAGE TOURISM DESTINATION

Wharton County has a rich history, as described above. Citizens of the area are very proud of this heritage. Proceeding without a "designated" historical district declaration, the citizens of Wharton have initiated economic development to revitalize the downtown square as illustrated in the recent renovation of the Court House ([Figure 2.2](#)) and desire to maintain the historical character of the city. Economic development is focused towards attracting the tourism industry, particularly historic and ecosystem tourism and as a stop over for travelers such as wintering tourists (often referred to as "snow-birds") and the recreation fishing industry. (Travelers often pass through on their way to the Gulf of Mexico or to San Antonio and Austin.)

Figure 2.2 Wharton County Courthouse

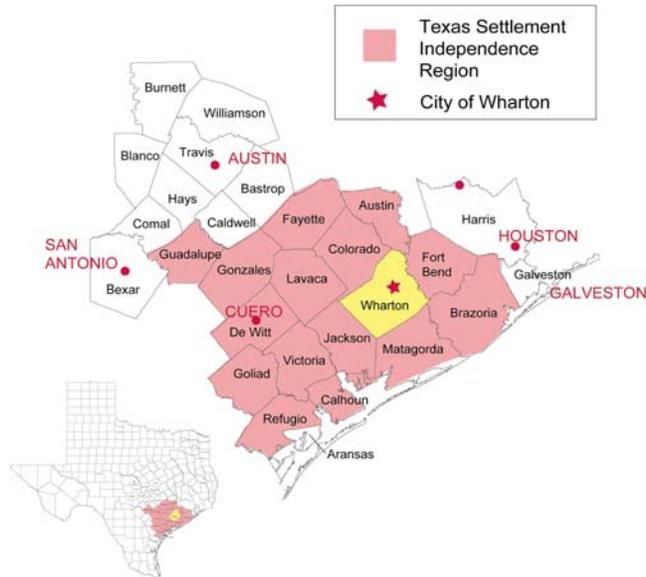


Wharton County is part of the Texas Settlement Independence Region and the Texas Independence Trail, which was organized in 1998, and consists of 17 counties, including Aransas, Austin, Brazoria, Calhoun, Colorado, DeWitt, Fayette, Fort Bend, Goliad, Gonzales, Guadalupe, Jackson, Lavaca, Matagorda, Refugio, Victoria and Wharton. (Figure 2.3) The Texas Settlement Independence Region's mission statement reads:

“to protect, enhance and interpret our region's history, culture and natural attractions to promote our region as a heritage tourism destination”.

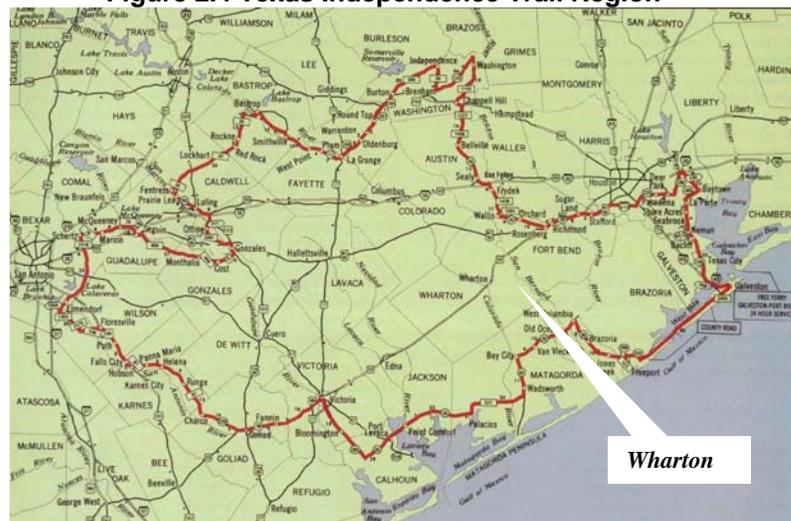
The group has determined that the region's unique identity is linked to the birth of the Republic and the State of Texas, and focus on “Texas' First Settlements”. Current efforts of the organization are to compile information for publications and to develop promotional literature and maps. With partnerships with six museums the organization plans to” interpret the LaSalle Odyssey, using artifacts recovered from the Belle shipwreck in Matagorda Bay, and from the excavation of Fort St. Louis, and envisions a re-creation of Fort St. Louis on Tonkawa Bluff in Riverside Park, Victoria, TX. In addition to these efforts, the El Campo Chamber of Commerce provides guided tours of more than 20 outdoor building murals, which reflect the city of El Campo's heritage. The Texas Settlement Independence Region has recently been adopted into the Texas Historical Commission's new Texas Travel Trails program.

Figure 2.3 Texas Settlement Independence Region



The Texas Independence Trail is an auto-trail ([Figure 2.4](#)) and was designated by the Texas Department of Highways in 1968. The trail region includes 28 counties from Liberty (east of Houston) along the Gulf Coast to Refugio (south of Victoria) to San Antonio (Bexar County) in the west and to Washington County in the north. It was designed with the purpose of encouraging travelers to experience the spirit of the “Texas Independence Story”. More information regarding the auto-trail can be obtained at the Texas Independence Trail Region Website www.texasindependencetrail.org.

Figure 2.4 Texas Independence Trail Region



HISTORICAL SITES IN WHARTON COUNTY

According to the “Marking the Way Through Wharton County”, a joint-effort publication of several, local Chambers of Commerce, Wharton County Junior College and the Wharton County Historical Commission, there are several historical and cultural sites within Wharton County; some are listed on the National Historical Register. As recorded the county’s historical sites are

listed in [Table 2.1](#) below (page 9); descriptions can be found in the “Marking the Way through Wharton County” publication.

ECOTOURISM AND HUNTING

Ecotourism and hunting is also providing diversification to the predominantly agricultural community. Wharton County is included in the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail System, and towns within the county have the potential of supplying overnight and long-term accommodations for wintering tourists interested in visiting the various birding trails in the region.

Hunting occurs on private lands surrounding the county’s communities and includes deer, waterfowl and squirrel hunting. The rice fields of area farms are utilized in the fall and winter months by large numbers of ducks and geese, thus providing hunting recreation and additional income to land owners. There is an active Ducks Unlimited group within Wharton County.

LOWER COLORADO RIVER AUTHORITY

Wharton County is also within the Lower Colorado River Authority’s (LCRA) region along with 13 other counties, including the Austin Metropolitan area ([Figure 2.4](#)). The river authority also partners with local communities to supply recreational opportunities for residents and tourists moving throughout the region. [Table 2.2](#) lists the various recreational amenities found within the LCRA region. LCRA has been developing water trails and nature trails downstream from Wharton at Matagorda Bay in Matagorda County along the confluence of the Colorado and the Gulf of Mexico. Increased, safe access to rivers is in high demand in the region, which is surrounded by private property. Some local landowners have recognized the demand for more access to the region’s natural resources for recreation and have established facilities to support this demand and diversify their economic status as well.

Table 2.1 Historical Site in Wharton County

- Lissie United Methodist Church (1907), Lissie, TX
- Holy Cross Catholic Parish (1925), East Bernard, TX
- Site of Post West Bernard Station (1837), Hungerford
- J. D. Hudgins Ranch (1839), Hungerford
- Site of Quinan Community (1872) near Hungerford
- New York, Texas & Mexican Railroad and the Community of Hungerford (1880)
- Wharton County Historical Museum, Wharton, TX
- East Bernard School House (1892), Wharton, TX
- Dan Rather House, moved to Wharton County Historical Museum
- Veterans Eternal Flame Memorial, Wharton
- Confederate Soldiers Memorial, Wharton
- Martin Luther King Memorial, Wharton
- Site of Plaza Hotel and Theatre, Wharton, TX
- St. Paul Lutheran Church, (1929, 1941) Wharton, TX
- St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, (1930) Wharton, TX
- First Baptist Church of Wharton, Wharton, TX
- Site of World War II Prisoner War Camp, Wharton, TX
- First United Methodist Church, Wharton, TX
- Shearith Israel Synagogue, 1956, Wharton, TX
- Colorado River Bridge, 1929, Wharton, TX
- Texas & New Orleans Railroad Bridge, 1903, Wharton, TX
- City of Wharton Riverfront Park and Port of Wharton, TX
- J. Judge Edwin Hawes House (1896), Wharton, TX
- K. Joseph a. Hamilton House (1885, 1907), Wharton, TX
- L. Garrett, John A. & Sophie, House (1897), Wharton, TX
- M. Croom, Wiley j., House (1868), Wharton, TX
- N. Brooks, Tom, House (1915), Wharton, TX
- O. Brooks-Foote House (1917), Wharton, TX
- Community of Egypt (1827), Egypt, TX
- William Jones Elliot Heard & Egypt Plantation, 1832, Egypt, TX
- Captain W. J. E. Heard Home – Red Brick Plantation, 1836, Egypt, TX
- Harrison, Albert Burr, Plantation House, 1860, Burr, TX
- G.C. & Clara Mick Home, 1900, Lago, TX
- Community of Boling – Mural Trail, (1900, 1990), Boling, TX
- 'Shanghai' Pierce Ranch House, 1886, Pierce, TX
- Abel H. 'Shanghai' Pierce Ranch, 1834, Pierce, TX
- Community of Danevang, 1894, Danevang, TX
- Ansgar Evangelical Lutheran Church & Cemetery, 1895, Davevang, TX
- Community of El Campo, 1882, El Campo, TX (once known as Prairie Switch)
- El Campo Library Building, 1940, El Campo, TX
- WPA Mural by Milton Zornes and Gene Sogioka, 1930s, El Campo, TX
- El Campo Museum of Natural History, 1978, El Campo, TX
- Louise Methodist Church, Louise, TX

Figure 2.4 Lower Colorado Region and Wharton County

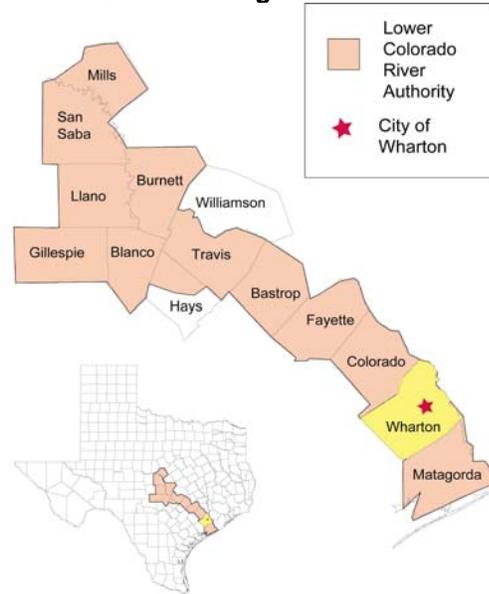


Table 2.1 LCRA Facilities

Existing Inventory of LCRA Facilities by County										
County	San Saba	Lampasas	Burnet	Llano	Blanco	Travis	Bastrop	Colorado	Fayette	Wharton
Total Acres	0	0	3,885	352	0	7,684	2,473	24	350	36
Entrance Station			21			19	2		2	
Trail Miles			19			17	22		8	
Picnic Tables			79	6		616	87	8	37	4
Improved Tent Camping Sites			58	36		43				
Multiple Use/RV Sites			25	15		20	70		21	
Shelters							6		8	
Cabins			65			1			8	
Dump Stations			1			1	2		1	
Restrooms (with plumbing)			14	4		28	9	1	5	
Restrooms (self contained)			2			9			1	1
Showers			6	1		4	2		2	
Pavilions							4	1	1	
Meeting Rooms			6			4	5		1	
Amphitheaters			2			2	1			
Fishing Piers			1				2	1	3	
Boat Ramps			4	1		9	2		2	
Canoe Launches			3			1	1	1	2	1
Marinas (no. of boat slips)							14		8	
Swimming Areas			2			10	2		1	
Playscapes							2		2	
Athletic Fields			2			4	6	2	4	
Concessions			3			3	2		1	
Total LCRA Acres per Region					4,237	7,684			2,847	
Population per Region					83,557	812,280			79,537	
LCRA acres/ 1000 people					51	9			36	

Texas currently has 31.3 acres of state parkland/ 1,000 state population

A recommended goal for state recreation areas, state natural areas, and state historic sites is 45 (national average) to 55 acres (top 25% of the nation)/ 1,000 people. Source: Texas Tech University. "A Report on the Needs Analysis Completed as Part of the Texas

Parks and Wildlife for the 21st Century. 2000

STATE RESOURCES

According to the latest versions of the Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan, (TORP), walking was the most popular recreational activity statewide and can be performed by all age groups with little investment in equipment. Texans listed camping, fishing, swimming, hiking and baseball as the most important recreational activities. Wildlife photography and viewing showed the greatest increase in participation. Using the average-number-of-participation-days method, the State determined that walking was the most frequently used activity, followed by birding and wildlife viewing. Citizens walked an average of 63.5 days per year. The major improvements needed in the state system according to a 1993 survey was an increase in safety/security of urban parks and increased promotion and awareness of the need for more parks and improved maintenance.

The 1990 TORP indicated weaknesses in the design of reservoirs and the need and desire for more consideration of the intrinsic values of free-flowing streams and downstream amenities. More access to the rivers was considered highly desirable. Separation of activities may be needed, particularly between fishing and motor-craft recreation. The state of Texas is interested in developing more access points to rivers, creating more opportunities for water-based recreation, protecting fragile stream and river resources and reducing user conflicts. Private landowners are encouraged to venture into recreational-based businesses.

The State of Texas has also defined a priority area that encompasses the triangular region between Interstate Highways I10, I35 and I45. This area includes land within a 90-minute drive from the large metropolitan areas of Houston, Austin, San Antonio, Dallas and Fort Worth. The Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) region, including Wharton County, is within this priority zone. The population within the LCRA region is expected to double by 2050. Because of this expected population increase, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department desires an increased acquisition of several 5,000-acre blocks within the I10/I35/I45 corridor to protect natural resources and to meet the recreational needs of this growing, urbanizing area. State parks listed as "high priority for expansion" include Bastrop/Buescher, Brazos Bend, Colorado Bend, Dinosaur Valley, Enchanted Rock, Fort Boggy, and Pedernales Falls.

The State has also identified the greatest need for recreation within this area to be local parks, greenbelts and multi-use greenway systems along streams and river corridors. The Houston-Galveston Metropolitan area, which includes Wharton, is already stressed in regards to recreational opportunities. The Greater Houston area has three state areas of 5,000 acres or greater within the 90 minute radius (assumed 100 mile radius). There are 0.84 miles per 100,000 residents identified as "Biking Trail Miles" within this area. "Hiking Trail Miles" equal 1.51 miles and "Equestrian Trail Miles" equal 1.80 miles. There are approximately 7.0 campsites per 100,000 people within the Greater Houston area as well. There is approximately 10.30 acres per 1,000 residents in Houston, which is the closest metropolitan area. There are approximately 11 Wildlife Management Areas within the 100-mile radius as shown in [Figure 3.1](#). (For additional information regarding the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's goals and concerns regarding recreation, and the Lower Colorado River Authority's objectives, please refer to the recreation section of the Interim Feasibility Report for the Lower Colorado River Basin.)

Figure 3.1. State Parks and Wildlife Management Areas (100-mile Radius)



THE CITY OF WHARTON, TEXAS

Wharton County has approximately 41,202 residents, with a median household income in 1999 of \$32,208. Per capita income was \$15,388. Approximately 50.4% of the county's population is between the ages 18-64, 13.9% are between the ages 65 and over, and 28.7 percent are between 5 and 18 years of age. The town of Wharton (county seat) has approximately 10,000 residents, and supports a service area of approximately 19,000 residents. The town is positioning itself for expected growth, particularly in the northeastern portion of the city, toward Hungerford and Boling. This growth is being fueled by the high-tech industrial growth around Fort Bend. Wharton will experience future development, which is focused toward serving as a "bedroom" community to employees of the Fort Bend area. The town's "recognized" schools are a magnet for settlement, and the city has begun to construct services to the northeastern outskirts of the city. Their downtown revitalization effort is patterned after Granbury, Texas, near Fort Worth, and is focused on historic renovation and supporting the heritage tourism initiatives described above.

The entire town of Wharton lies within the 500-year floodplain, and much of it is within the 100-year floodplain of the Colorado River. The city and the local Chambers of Commerce markets the high quality school district, the Wharton County Junior College, a City Industrial Team, an Economic Development Corporation, an Industrial Development Foundation, Planning Commission, Tax Abatement Reinvestment Zone, Southern Building Code Compliance, and an Enterprise Zone. The town is a member of the Houston-Galveston Area Council of Governments.

The city is also home to a regional medical center with the region's first and only open MRI Imaging Center and a Cancer Center. The Wharton Civic Center contains an auditorium that seats 750 people, large meeting areas and several smaller meeting rooms. It is within close vicinity to the Fort Bend Technical Center in Richmond. The town also has a community theatre, presenting live plays (\$10) during the fall-early spring period, hotels and recently established bed and breakfast facilities (3), which range from \$70 - \$85 per night. One facility caters to the larger groups with accommodations beginning at \$135 for a suite. The historic site and well-known Wharton landmark known as the Teepee Motel (*Figure 4.1*) is currently undergoing renovations and will include the town's only RV park (full hookups) in addition to the teepee rooms. Rates are advertised on internet sites at \$52.50 per night.

Figure 4.1 Renovated Teepee Motel



EXISTING RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN WHARTON, TEXAS

Recreational facilities within the city are listed in *Table 4.1*.

Table 4.1 City of Wharton Recreation

Recreation Feature	Quantity and/or Distance
Small city parks - The Colorado Riverside Park contains picnic areas, children's playground equipment, volleyball court, restrooms, paved paths and limited access to the Colorado River for water-based recreational opportunities.	10
Tennis courts	12
Private golf course and country club	1
Baseball and football	School facilities are currently meeting the demand for organized recreation, but this may change as population base increases.
Hunting	Local private landowners are supplying access for a fee
Equestrian	County fairgrounds supply indoor facilities; private landowners are supplying some trail riding opportunities.
Professional Sports	Houston is closest supplier
The Brazos Bend State Park	30 miles away
Lake Texana	35 miles away
Gulf of Mexico	45 miles away, saltwater fishing and water trails on Lower Colorado

With the close proximity to the Gulf Coast and the popularity of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trails, significant drive-through tourism travels through the Wharton vicinity, particularly in the winter season. This tourism is spurring the recent growth in the Bed-and-Breakfast and nature-based tourism markets. Other towns within the area are also beginning to establish RV camping facilities. The Brazos Bend State Park is within easy access to the residents; however, the park is often closed, because visitor capacity limits are exceeded.

Hunting recreation is available within the county. Farmland, (Figure 4.2) particularly rice fields, in the county, is often marketed to goose and duck hunters, and Ducks Unlimited is actively working with landowners to manage farmlands for waterfowl species. The Pierce Ranch, home of Karankawa Plains, is a working ranch that offers various recreational opportunities to the public for a fee, including bed and breakfast facilities, big game, upland and waterfowl hunting, horseback riding, nature tourism and wildlife viewing in spring and summer, fishing (from man-made ponds), and canoeing opportunities. The Wharton Chamber of Commerce partners with the ranch to conduct ranch tours, which is a popular attraction for wintering tourists.

Figure 4.2 Farmland Outside of Wharton, TX



IDENTIFIED RECREATIONAL NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

As discussed above, recreational opportunities are limited in the Wharton area and overcrowding is currently affecting availability and use of state parks within the region. Members within the Wharton community desire expansion of the Colorado Riverside Park, creation of hike/bike/nature trails and pedestrian linkage to the downtown center and courtyard. Currently trail-based bicycling and equestrian trail facilities do not exist, but are in high demand throughout the Lower Colorado River Authority's jurisdiction. The nearest equestrian facility is the county fairgrounds, but trails do not exist on the site. Skateboarders and inline skaters would also like trail-based recreational areas. The Pierce Ranch and other ranches in the region have been venturing into the recreational industry and providing horseback riding and other outdoor recreational opportunities for a fee. These ranch amenities are popular with tourists; however the local residents need access to everyday recreational opportunities within their communities.

Recreation desires and needs include:

- Access for watercraft

Access is desired by the community; the nearest public boat access ramp is the “David Hall Ramp” upstream, and is considered by some residents to be unsafe. Other than this ramp, the cities of Columbus and Bay City have the nearest boat ramps to the Wharton area. The Lower Colorado River Authority is currently constructing a kayak trail in Matagorda County nearby; however, more access is desired. Wharton civic leaders are very interested in the construction of a safe boat ramp in the Riverside Park area. They have also tossed around development of a low water dam, which would accommodate kayaking, a larger lake for recreation and water storage.

- Trails and/or Trail Systems

Trails were considered highly desirable by civic leaders. Currently trail-based activities within the city are virtually non-existent but local demand is not currently high enough to support development of trails. Levees proposed by the Corps, could provide pathways for future trails if the town chooses to utilize these. Linkage to others areas would increase the functionality and overall use of any future trails associated with the proposed levees.

- RV Camping Park with Sewage Facilities

The city is also interested in developing an RV Park with sewage facilities. This was identified as a high priority along with pedestrian access to the riverside park and boat access. The RV development underway at Teepee Motel may meet a portion of this need.

- Creation of a Lake

There is significant interest in developing a lake (off-stream) and providing additional water-based recreation. (The lack of significant topographic variation and geologic features will limit the development of this option. In regards to the creation of a lake, the close proximity of the Wharton Municipal Airport and Federal Aviation requirements must also be considered.)

CONCLUSION

Wharton is within an hour drive from downtown Houston, (55 miles), and has the potential to serve as a “bedroom community” for commuters working in the Houston Metroplex, as well as other cities in the region. Plans to develop additional highways through the city are underway, with the conversion of one expired rail route into a multi-lane highway. As per the Lower River Colorado River Authority estimates, Wharton County is not expected to receive the major growth, predominantly due to the presence of farmlands and its location with regards to Austin and Houston. However, it has the potential to receive significant tourism as travelers move between coastal areas to Austin and San Antonio. With the development of RV parks, the area could serve as a significant “wintering stop-over” area for tourists. Improvement and an increase of outdoor recreational amenities, including increased access to water, development of wildlife habitat and viewing opportunities, trails and heritage tourism and seasonal event planning, could bring significant economic growth to the city.

Local citizens are interested in developing more outdoor-recreational opportunities for themselves, as well as to attract more tourism. They are particularly interested in the development of boat ramps, trails with linkages to downtown, low water dams and possibly a lake. Opportunities exist to create some of these amenities in conjunction with flood control efforts, predominantly trail based features; however, at present the local sponsor has chosen to restrict this project to flood damage reduction only. Future development of trails and small pocket parks may be developed by the local sponsor as growth of the town occurs.

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