
Comal River's little-known headwaters nearly ready for debut

By **Brendan Gibbons** | September 11, 2017 | Updated: September 11, 2017 10:41pm

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Photo: John Davenport, STAFF / San Antonio Express-News

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Blieders Creek flows Thursday September 7, 2017 next to the Headwaters at the Comal site in New Braunfels, Texas. The site contains the headwaters of the Comal Springs, the original water source for the New ... [more](#)

NEW BRAUNFELS — Most people think that the Comal River begins at Landa Park, a historic public space in the heart of this city on the edge of the Hill Country.

Few know that the river's true origin lies farther upstream, where spring water flows up from the fractured limestone aquifer below and pours across a creek bed. The spring is inaccessible, hidden by trees and a New Braunfels Utilities property at Lakeview Boulevard and East Klingemann Street.

This fall, the public will see the headwaters spring up close as NBU completes the first phase of a restoration of the 16-acre property next to the steep slope of the Balcones Escarpment.

NBU is calling this spot the Headwaters at the Comal. If all goes as planned, the property will have walking trails, native plant gardens, an outdoor classroom and a "living building," **among other features, by 2021.**

"This was all asphalt and a maintenance facility yard," said Headwaters managing director Nancy Pappas, standing in front of mounds of contoured soil during a tour of the construction site Thursday.

"What we have done is removed all that impervious cover and brought in soil to create a more natural look to the property, what it might have been like 1,000 years ago," she said.

The Comal is the shortest river in Texas and, at one point, was the main water supply for New Braunfels. In the 1800s, its power fueled an early grist mill and cotton gin on its banks. Nowadays, hordes of tubers descend on the river each summer to ride a famous stretch of water below Landa Park.

The Headwaters project is a milestone in the river's history, marking a transition from exploitation to environmental appreciation and stewardship.

"That's the future for Texas," said Atanacio "Nacho" Campos, a local attorney and NBU board member since 2000. "We have always been privileged to have abundance, and now we're having to think about conservation, how we're having to use and reuse. All of this is important for future generations."

By next month, NBU hopes to cover the mounds of exposed soil at the Headwaters with hundreds of trees and plants, species chosen to restore the riparian forest along the river, and create a native prairie on the newly formed hills. The utility also will remove a concrete cap placed over the springs in 1936.

Getting rid of all the asphalt and concrete will also keep more pollution out of the springs. NBU estimates that 6 tons of animal waste, road runoff, leaves, grass, dirt and gravel are washed into the water each year during rainstorms. The restoration should reduce that by 94 percent by slowing down runoff and letting it infiltrate the soil.

The project's first phase costs \$6 million, including \$1.5 million from grants and donations. The utility also spent \$2 million on design and permitting work. The three-phase project is expected to cost \$22.9 million, with NBU hoping to get \$11.1 million from grants and donations.

NBU, a public water and electric utility serving nearly 74,000 customers, has been trying to figure out a way to repurpose the property since the early 2000s after it was damaged in severe flooding in 1998.

Before that, the property had been the site of New Braunfels' first water works and was home to NBU's operations center from the 1960s to 2004, when it completed a new location on FM 306.

"When we had to expand, we then needed to start thinking about what to do with that property," Campos said. "We started discussing just reclaiming it and being better stewards."

Pappas, the Headwaters managing director, and Judith Dykes-Hoffmann, another NBU board member, are excited about the living building, set to be constructed during the second phase, between 2018 and 2020.

In the second phase, an 8,000-square-foot structure will be repurposed to create walls that support vines and other plants that attract butterflies and other pollinators. The ceiling will collect rainwater and condensation, with water trickling down into pools that mimic wetlands, with the pools tied into a recycling system that reuses toilet water from the other buildings.

The idea is to evoke the Edwards Aquifer, a massive limestone system that serves as the prime water source for the San Antonio region. The aquifer is the reason the Comal River exists, and its springs marked a stopping point for people for thousands of years.

"During periods of drought, the aquifer goes down, our springs stop running," said Dykes-Hoffmann, a geography professor at Texas Lutheran University. "When there's not the rain or the condensation, the systems will function in a different way."

"The guests who arrive that day might see, after a large rain event, a system very active, much like the aquifer being very active," she continued. "Then during a long period of drought, they may come and see an area that is dried up."

A third phase will involve adding trails, landscaping, signs and parking.

NBU hopes to open the restored landscape and springs to the public at least twice a week by the end of October, Pappas said. The utility is still seeking funding for the second phase.

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