

# Rain to River



## Rain to River: Austin Watershed Protection Strategic Plan Review and Adoption



Climate, Water, Environment, & Parks Committee

Austin Watershed Protection | April 22, 2026

# What is Rain to River?

Austin Watershed Protection's Strategic Plan to Protect Austin's Creeks and Communities

## Guiding Blueprint for Department

- Establishes our mission, vision, and values
- Sets strategies and direction for the next 10 years

**Note:** Rain to River will update and replace the current Watershed Protection Strategic Plan

## Communication Resource

- Helps explain our work and priorities to staff, policymakers, and the community



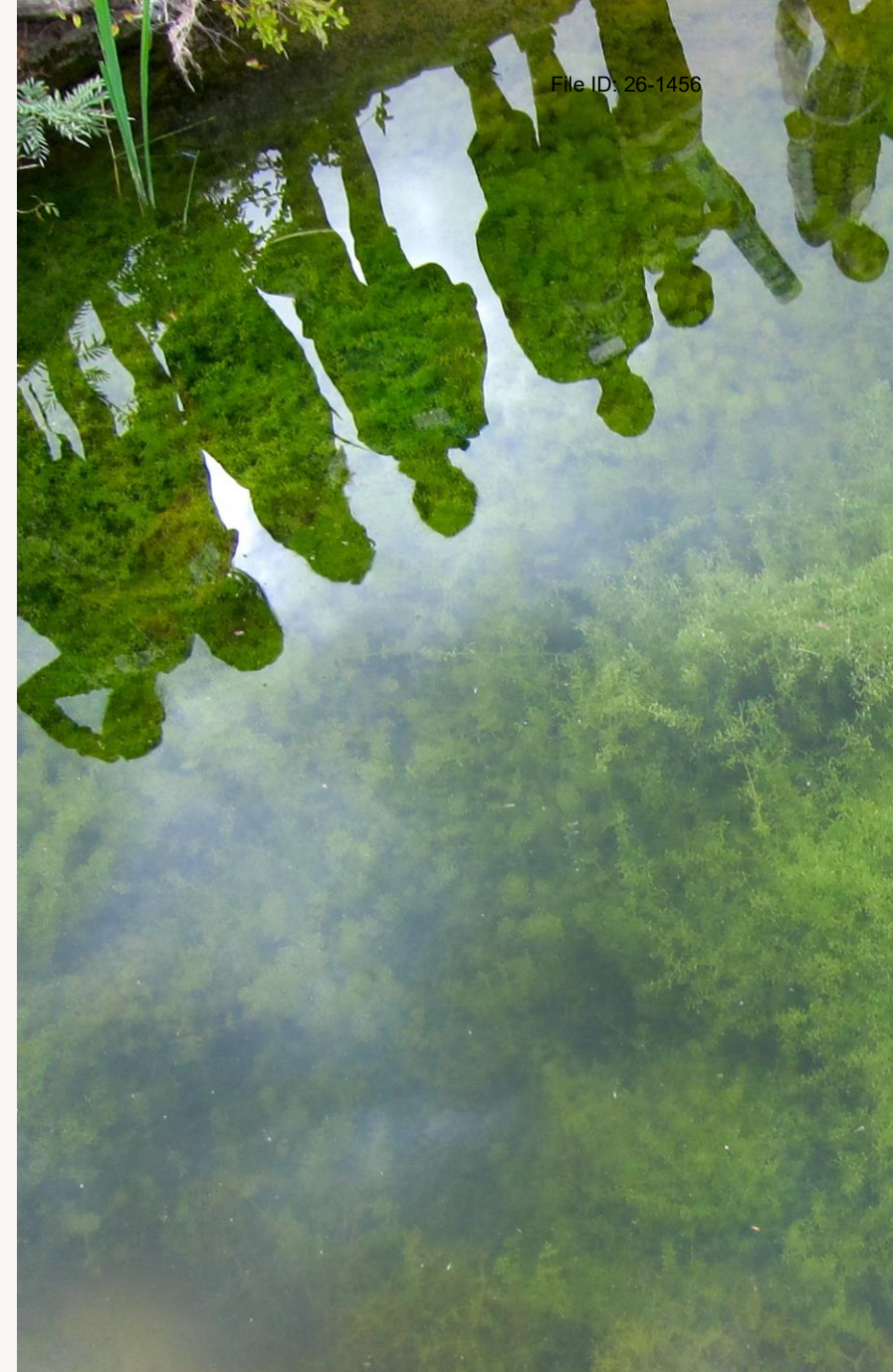
# Guiding Principles for the Plan

- Center the needs of vulnerable populations
- Engage the community through clear and open communication
- Align our aspirations with community priorities
- Strengthen partnerships for greater impact
- Empower our leaders to advocate for our mission
- Create a dynamic and inclusive framework



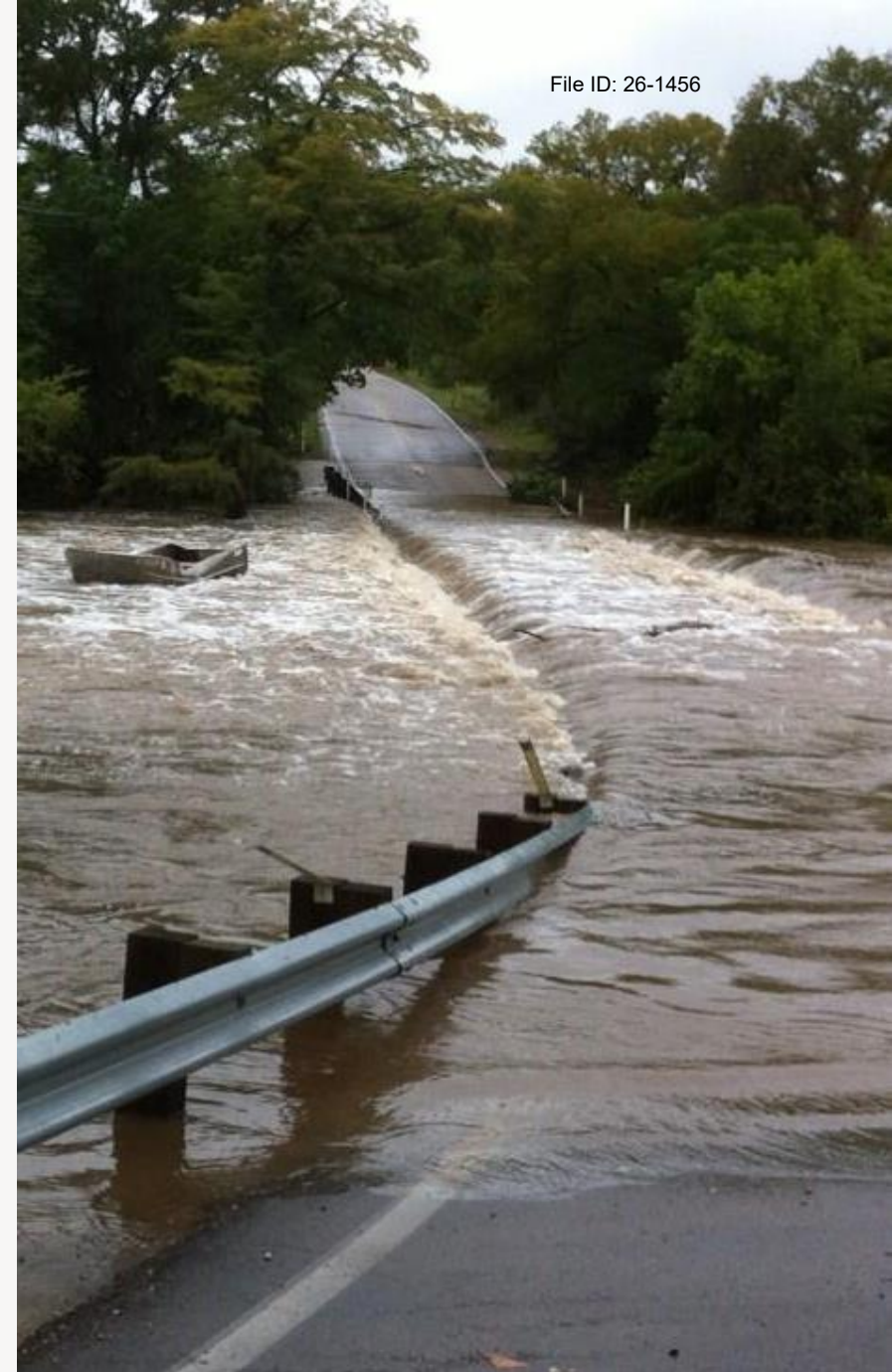
# Plan Highlights

- Our mission remains unchanged to reduce the impacts of flooding, erosion, and water pollution
- Reflects how we will strengthen and adapt our work to center community and build resilience
- Expands our focus to include community voices, lived experience, and shared stewardship as essential components of our infrastructure
- Holistic and proactive approach that balances immediate needs with our long-term vision
- Equity not as a one-time initiative, but as an ongoing practice rooted in accountability and trust



# Our Challenges

- Climate change is driving more extreme weather, including more intense storms and prolonged drought
- Historic inequities have left some neighborhoods more exposed to flooding and degraded waterways
- Urbanization and development add pressure to our natural environment and infrastructure
- Housing costs are driving displacement of residents and an increase in people experiencing homelessness



# Community Engagement

- Robust and inclusive process that spanned multiple years
- We identified stakeholder groups that have been historically underrepresented in our past planning efforts and worked to engage with them more directly
- We partnered with local organizations, community ambassadors, and advocacy groups to reach residents in every district
- Engagement took many forms—surveys, interviews, focus groups, neighborhood meetings, and community events



# Community Activation Group

The Community Activation Group (CAG) helped shape the content of the plan and ensured that the diverse voices of our community are integral to the Rain to River planning process and Austin Watershed Protection's work.

- Diverse community leaders with expertise in the environment, community health, and disaster preparedness and recovery
- Helped shape the plan via:
  - ✓ Synthesis of community feedback
  - ✓ Helping design & broadcast survey
  - ✓ Community asset mapping
  - ✓ Brainstorming goals and metrics





# Rain to River

A STRATEGIC PLAN TO PROTECT AUSTIN'S CREEKS AND COMMUNITIES

## 01 INTRODUCTION

### Overview of Process

The Introduction to the Rain to River Strategic Plan sets the context for Austin Watershed Protection's work by framing water as both a life-giving resource and a source of risk, shaped by climate change, growth, and historic inequities. It explains why the plan is being updated, highlighting lessons learned since 2016, escalating challenges, and a deeper understanding of environmental justice and community vulnerability. The section describes a deliberate shift from a purely technical approach to one that values lived experience and community knowledge alongside science and engineering. It outlines the multi-year planning process, including the roles of staff, the Steering Committee, the Technical Advisory Group, and the Community Activation Group, emphasizing how community input shaped the plan from the start. Finally, the Introduction establishes the plan's purpose as a forward-looking, equitable framework to guide watershed protection efforts over the next decade.

## 02 UNDERSTAND

### Austin's Rain to River Story

In the Understand section, we explore Austin's deep connection to water and the history that has shaped our watersheds. From the city's founding along the Colorado River to the development of neighborhoods and parks, water has been central to life here, but historic inequities and rapid growth have created ongoing challenges. We highlight how past policies, floods, and development patterns have affected communities, particularly in East Austin, and the impacts these factors have on flood risk, erosion, and water quality today. This section traces the evolution of Austin Watershed Protection's programs and protections, showing how science, planning, and community collaboration have guided our efforts and laid the foundation for a strategic plan emphasizing resilience, equity, and long-term watershed health.

## 03 ENVISION

### A VISION FOR THE COMMUNITY

The Envision section lays out a shared vision for Austin's watershed future. The community vision reflects what residents and stakeholders want for the future, while the department vision defines how we will operate and deliver on that future. Both visions were informed by the ten community priorities that grew from years of listening to residents, organizations, and stakeholders. Together, these perspectives shape a future where watershed protection is a social contract, linking flood safety, water quality, climate resilience, access to nature, and public health with accountability and shared stewardship. This section shows how the vision and priorities align to guide how we plan, invest, engage, and deliver solutions—setting the stage for the commitments in the Enact section.

## 04 ENACT

### Implementing the Vision

The Enact section describes how Austin Watershed Protection will turn the community's vision and priorities into accountable, long-term action. It sets out our commitment to community, innovation, and responsible governance as the foundation for how we plan, invest, and deliver our work. This section looks ten years ahead, recognizing that reducing risk, restoring watersheds, and repairing historic inequities requires sustained effort and adaptation. Over this decade, we will make measurable progress toward our larger vision—laying the groundwork for a future where Austin's watersheds are healthy, resilient, and equitable for generations to come.

# What's in the plan?

## Introduction

Discover how this plan is different and how it came together

## Understand

Learn about our mission, values, and the work we do

## Envision

Explore the vision and community priorities that guide us

## Enact

Dive into our commitments and strategies for the next decade

# Department Mission

To protect the lives, property, and environment of our community by reducing the impact of flooding, erosion, and water pollution.

# Department Goals

- Safeguard lives and reduce the impact of flooding to the Austin community.
- Create a safe and stable stream system that protects the Austin community from erosion and encourages the use and enjoyment of Austin's creeks and lakes.
- Protect and improve the health of Austin's creeks, rivers, lakes, and springs to provide clean and flowing water for all.
- Protect and enhance the condition and function of the City's drainage infrastructure, including creeks, drainage channels, storm drain pipes, tunnels, and stormwater ponds.



# Department Vision

We aspire to an equitable, resilient Austin for current and future generations, where our natural and built environments work in harmony to ensure our community feels safe when it rains and our waterways are healthy.

# Department Values

We are  
**STEWARDS**

- S**ervice – Show Up
- T**eamwork – Paddle Together
- E**quity – Lift All Boats
- W**isdom – Reflect And Listen
- A**ccountability – Anchor Trust
- R**esilience – Ride The Waves
- D**edication – Dive In
- S**ustainability – Shape Tomorrow



# Community Vision

- A future where Austin's creeks, rivers, and green spaces are healthy, vibrant, and accessible to everyone
- Watershed protection as a social contract between the City and the community, built on trust, collaboration, and accountability
- Planning and solutions shaped through co-creation, with historically marginalized voices centered in decisions
- Waterways and natural spaces not divided by zip code but treated as shared spaces for connection, learning, and care
- A vision that elevates not just what we protect, but how we work together to protect it



# Community Priorities

## 1. Equity and Inclusion

Ensure historically underserved communities have equitable access to resources and decision-making processes.

## 2. Flood Mitigation and Emergency Preparedness

Protect lives and property by addressing flooding and erosion proactively.

## 3. Climate Resilience and Sustainability

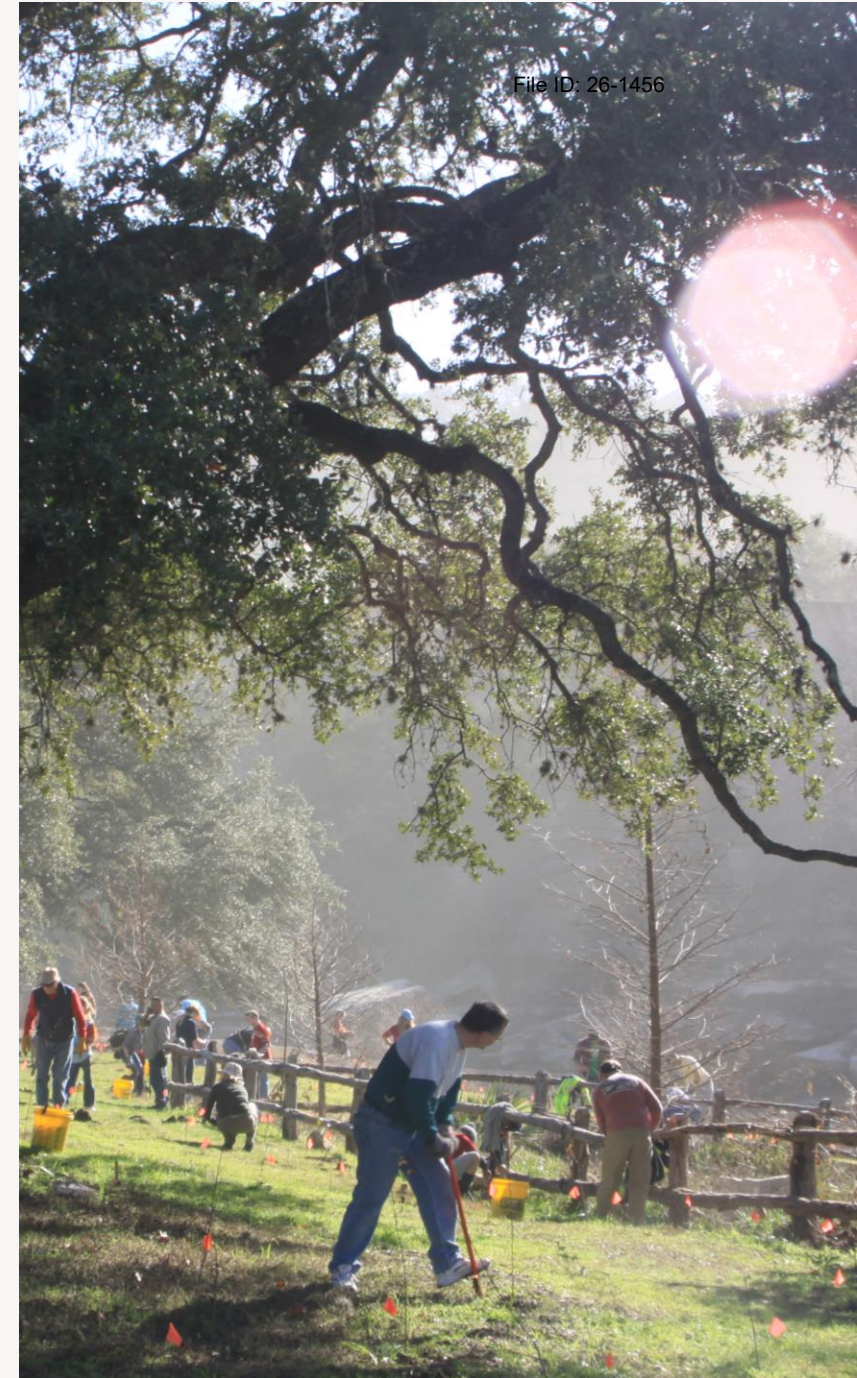
Integrate climate adaptation strategies to address drought, extreme heat, and habitat loss.

## 4. Natural Resource Protection and Restoration

Preserve, restore, and enhance Austin's creeks, lakes, and natural spaces.

## 5. Trust and Collaboration

Ensure natural spaces are safe, inviting, and accessible for all residents.



# Community Priorities

## 6. Accessibility and Public Engagement

Ensure natural spaces are safe, inviting, and accessible for all residents.

## 7. Sustainable Development and Growth

Balance urban growth with environmental health and sustainability.

## 8. Support for Unhoused and Vulnerable Populations

Provide resources and safety for unhoused individuals while addressing systemic issues.

## 9. Education and Youth Engagement

Foster a culture of environmental stewardship and resilience among residents.

## 10. Innovation and Leadership

Position Austin as a model city for environmental stewardship and progressive practices.



# Commitments and Strategies

- Focus on how we approach our work
- Guide our future direction for the next decade
- Strengthen and adapt our work so it reflects community priorities and builds long-term resilience

- 1.1 Create a Dedicated Community Liaison Role
- 1.2 Create and Sustain a Community Advisory Group for Implementation
- 1.3 Cultivate a Strong, Inclusive Workforce
- 1.4 Create a Shared Framework for Equity
- 1.5 Collaborate with Partners to Protect Vulnerable Populations
- 1.6 Enhance Community Education and Preparedness
- 1.7 Enhance Readiness for Emergencies
- 1.8 Improve Response and Recovery After Major Storms

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**Center  
Community**

- 2.1 Create a Holistic Watershed Health and Safety Framework
- 2.2. Create Clear and Meaningful Watershed Targets
- 2.3. Enhance Data and Modeling Capabilities
- 2.4. Deliver Clear, Actionable Data to the Public
- 2.5. Implement a Proactive Approach to Infrastructure
- 2.6. Promote Opportunities for Shared Stewardship
- 2.7. Collaborate with Partners on Shared Priorities
- 2.8. Collaborate to Promote Responsible Development

**Innovate  
Together**

- 3.1 Define Clear and Achievable Levels of Service
- 3.2 Center Asset Management in Decision-Making
- 3.3 Implement an Equitable Decision-Making Approach
- 3.4 Understand and Address Past Environmental Harms
- 3.5 Create a Portfolio Management Structure
- 3.6 Report our Performance and Progress
- 3.7 Cultivate a Balanced and Proactive Work Culture
- 3.8 Maintain and Share Knowledge

**Govern  
Responsibly**



# SAFEGUARD & EMPOWER VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

## 1.6. Enhance Community Education and Preparedness

### What We Will Do:

We're building a citywide approach to flood preparedness through community events, practical education, and partnerships with local organizations. Our efforts will prioritize neighborhood-specific information, renter-focused outreach, and culturally relevant materials, while empowering local leaders and volunteers to extend preparedness into everyday community life.

### Why This Matters to Community:

- Helps residents understand their risk and how to prepare before, during, and after storms.
- Builds neighborhood capacity for preparedness and mutual aid.
- Ensures outreach is accessible and relevant for renters, unhoused residents, and other vulnerable communities.

### Why This Matters to Staff:

- Advances our mission by ensuring the community is informed and prepared.
- Strengthens collaboration with community partners and trusted messengers.
- Creates feedback loops that inform future programs and strategic decisions.



By 2036, Austin Watershed Protection will maintain a citywide, community-centered flood preparedness network supported by neighborhood-based education, accessible tools, and strong partnerships. Every community will have the knowledge, connections, and resources needed to understand and respond to flood risk and strengthen resilience.

Community Priority Tracker



# INVEST IN PROACTIVE AND EQUITABLE INFRASTRUCTURE

## 2.6. Promote Opportunities for Shared Stewardship

### What We Will Do:

We're expanding opportunities for communities to help shape and care for green infrastructure and natural spaces through efforts such as tree plantings along waterways, rain gardens, wildflower meadows, and creek adoption programs. Equity and watershed conditions will guide where and how we invest, ensuring communities with the greatest need have access to meaningful stewardship opportunities. These activities will support healthier ecosystems and build community connections. They also can support green workforce pathways by prioritizing local hiring, training and skill building, and paid participation where possible. Each project will be developed in partnership with residents and local organizations to ensure it is responsive to community needs, grounded in local expertise, and includes a clear, sustainable plan for long-term care.

### Why This Matters to Community:

- Provides more opportunities for people to actively care for the places they value.
- Ensures stewardship resources are directed to communities with the greatest need.
- Builds trust and pride through projects that reflect local knowledge and cultural context.

### Why This Matters to Staff:

- Expands our impact to support more resilient, healthy waterways and green spaces.
- Strengthens our relationships with community partners and residents.
- Promotes green workforce pathways by creating opportunities for collaborative stewardship.



By 2036, Austin will expand equitable opportunities for shared stewardship of green infrastructure and natural spaces that strengthens watershed health, builds community connection, and delivers benefits where they are needed most.

### Community Priority Tracker

1. EQUITY & INCLUSION	2. FLOOD MITIGATION & EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS	3. CLIMATE RESILIENCE & SUSTAINABILITY	4. NATURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION & RESTORATION	5. ACCESSIBILITY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	6. TRUST & COLLABORATION	7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT & GROWTH	8. SUPPORT FOR UNHOUSED & VULNERABLE POPULATIONS	9. EDUCATION & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT	10. INNOVATION & LEADERSHIP
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓



# ESTABLISH LEVEL OF SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

## 3.1. Define Clear and Achievable Levels of Service

### What We Will Do:

We're creating a level of service framework that sets clear, achievable standards for how work is prioritized and delivered. This framework will help staff navigate competing demands with confidence, protect capacity, and ensure consistent service—even during emergencies—while giving residents and partners a transparent view of how decisions are made.

### Why This Matters to Community:

- Builds trust and accountability through clear communication of service expectations.
- Sets realistic expectations about what we can deliver and why.
- Provides transparency about how decisions are made when trade-offs occur.

### Why This Matters to Staff:

- Creates clarity for decision-making, reducing confusion and stress.
- Protects staff capacity by guiding prioritization during urgent or competing demands.
- Strengthens collaboration by clarifying roles and responsibilities across departments.



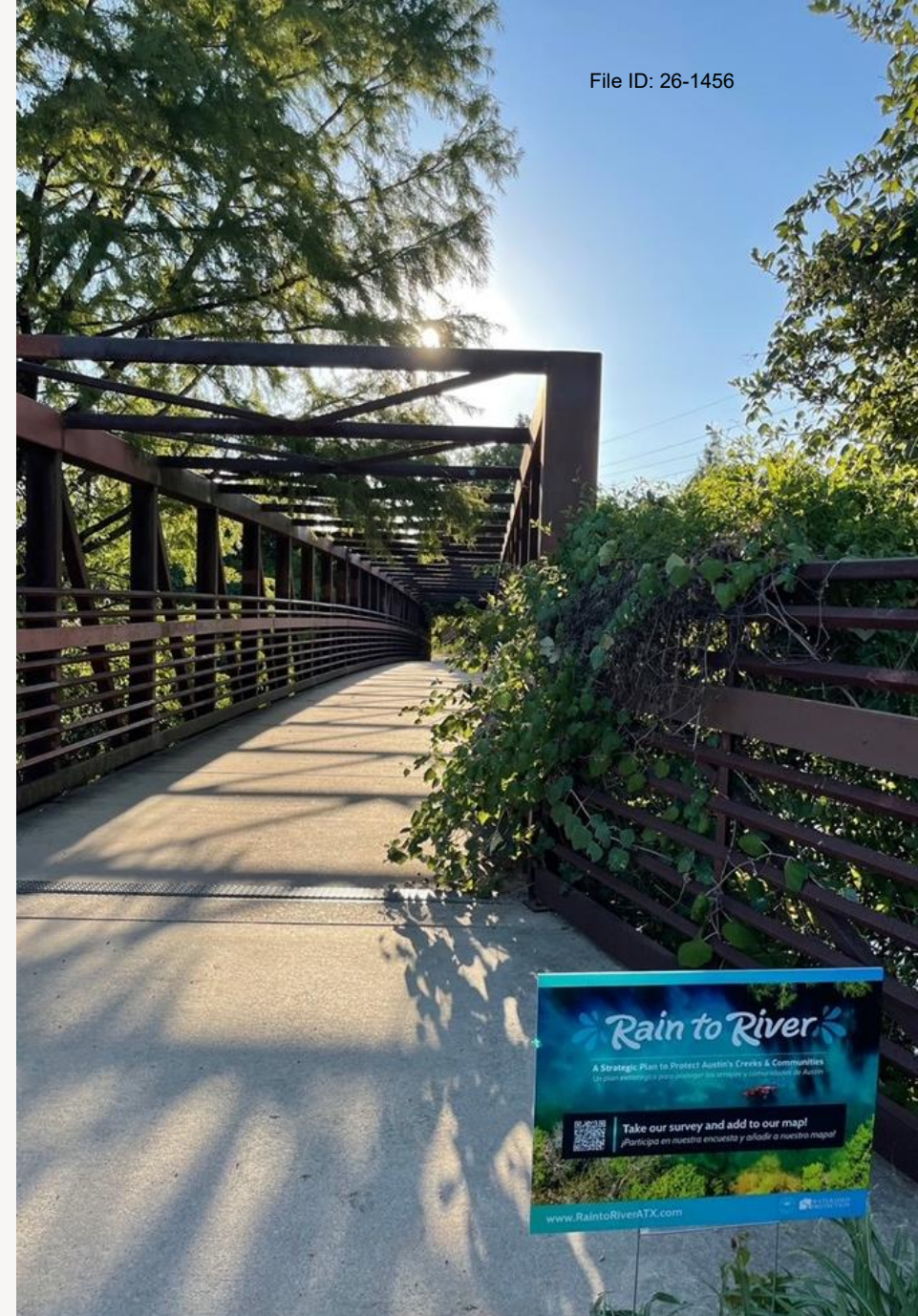
By 2036, Austin Watershed Protection will operate with a clear, shared, and publicly understood level of service framework that defines what residents can expect and what staff can realistically deliver. This framework will guide daily decisions, long-term planning, and emergency response while strengthening transparency and accountability.

### Community Priority Tracker



# Schedule

- April 1** Release draft plan to community
- April 9** Rain to River Community Activation Group
- April 15** Environmental Commission
- April 22** Climate, Water, Parks, and Environment Council Committee
- May 15** Economic Opportunity Council Committee
- May 21** City Council





# Questions and Discussion

[RainToRiverATX.com](http://RainToRiverATX.com)

