

How to Protect Wildlife by Organizing Successful Community Advocacy



Advocacy: *To advocate means to call to one's aid and encompasses a broad range of activities used to influence public policy - including educating, organizing, and lobbying.*

Texas Conservation Alliance (TCA) is approached regularly by citizens interested in addressing a threat to the environment and their quality of life, such as a public project, private development, or industrial facility proposed in a nearby area. These Texans are suddenly faced with a bewildering array of government regulations, politically-motivated decisions by agencies or elected officials, and often a well-funded individual, agency, or corporation that is pushing for an action that will negatively impact their lives and property values.

This advocacy guide is intended as a first step to guide community-based response to projects or impacts to wildlife and the environment in Texas. It is important to note that any of the same steps can be useful in promoting a positive project for the community, such as a park or wildlife corridor.

INITIAL STEPS

1. Learn as much as you can about the project.

Do your research. Find out all you can about the project, who is behind it, where and when it will occur, and what are the negative impacts to wildlife or the environment. For a major development, industrial facility, or any action that requires removing trees or altering the landscape, research impacts such as potential flooding (stormwater flows, wetlands, and overlap with a floodplain), increased traffic, possible lowering of air or water quality, proximity to a school, hospital or park, impact on property values, potential problems with septic, erosion, or increased density.

Adverse Impacts. In addition to environmental impacts, determine who might be adversely impacted – neighborhoods, other businesses, local economy, special interests, broader region – and *how* each will be impacted: reduced revenue or property values, health effects, loss of recreational opportunities, noxious odors, safety, etc.

Look for alternatives to the project. What, if any, alternatives have been considered? What, if any, alternatives to a similar situation have been implemented successfully elsewhere? Decide whether an alternatives analysis is useful; the alternatives will vary with the specific proposal. Consider the

questions of “What will happen if the project *isn't* built?” and “Is there another option for accomplishing what the promoters want?” This may increase your credibility and might lead to an acceptable solution.

Seek Legal Council: Ask for advice from an environmental attorney and other professionals whose expertise might be helpful. Most will have an initial conversation without charge and help you determine useful directions.

2. Determine the leverage points.

The primary points at which a project may be affected include:

- a. Planning process - Planning and Zoning Commission or other initial planning steps
- b. Governmental approval - decisions by a city council or other elected or appointed body
- c. Permits - specific permit approval by city, county, state agencies, and/or federal government
- d. Funding - public funding source or tax credits/exemptions for private companies
- e. Public opinion – don't underestimate a strong public response that can really leverage your position.

3. Organize a group.

Set up a public meeting. For a local project, start by alerting nearby residents and businesses and setting a meeting in a convenient public building or private home. Have a sign-up sheet ready, post a map of the project on a wall or easel if relevant, and know who is going to speak to describe the project in a straightforward way. Serve refreshments, have people in your group welcome newcomers, make it as comfortable as possible for people to participate.

Choose an impactful group name. Culminate the meeting by voting to create an informal group with a name [“Save the _____” or “Citizens Against _____” or whatever fits]. It's much more effective for an advocate to be speaking on behalf of a group than only oneself. And people will be much more comfortable getting involved in the issue if they can say they are with a group.

Develop core advocates. Once the group is formed, develop a core of individuals who are most involved and can represent the group, surrounded by wider circles of people who will write letters to elected officials, attend meetings, or take specific actions. Reach out to a broad range of interests – any segment of the populace that will be impacted – business leaders, residents, adjacent neighbors,

conservationists, recreation enthusiasts, and landowners. If it is a big project that will impact the whole region, begin building a broader coalition.

4. Contact elected officials, city managers, planning & zoning commissioners, any officials who have information or decision-making power for the proposed project.

Potential agencies/government entities that may have a role:

- a. City (mayor, city council, city staff) if in city limits or extra-terrestrial jurisdiction (ETJ) of a city,
- b. Local planning and zoning commission if in a city or ETJ,
- c. Property Owners Association (POA) or Home Owners Association (HOA) (check charter/bylaws) if within a POA or HOA,
- d. County (county judge and county commissioners court),
- e. Local or regional parks boards if relevant,
- f. Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ, the state regulatory authority for air and water quality),
- g. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) if wildlife or a state park is impacted,
- h. Texas Historical Commission (THC) if historical and/or archeological sites are impacted,
- i. US Army Corps of Engineers if wetlands are disturbed.

When contacting an elected official, try to have a constituent of that official make the contact and/or attend the meeting. The constituent may not be the primary spokesperson, but their presence will spark the elected official's interest. If the elected official wants you to meet with staff, by all means take the meeting, and give it your full attention. Elected officials rely on their staff and a staff member on your side can be significant.

5. Create talking points that clearly and succinctly state what the project is and what its negative impacts will be, and develop ways to circulate the information.

Market & share the issue. Draft talking points and adapt them as a printed flyer, an email blast, social media memes, whatever fits for the "market" of people it would be helpful to reach. Create a website, Instagram profile, and Facebook page. Secure advertising space in HOA or neighborhood association newsletters, any communication tool available.

Be succinct, impactful, and fact based. Avoid complicated science or engineering jargon and describe the project in familiar language with fact-based talking points. Include photos, post short videos on social media or website, use maps, describe wildlife and habitat impacted, anything to illustrate the issue. Translate the talking points into Spanish or other languages that may be used in the region.

Identify your group as the source of information.

Important: Be sure to identify your group as the source of the information and put contact information on all communications. People are suspicious of “information” when the source isn’t identified.

6. Recruit coverage by local and/or regional media – newspapers, radio, and TV. Actively court reporters to cover your issue.

Send a press release, letter, or your talking points to media outlets who serve your area, including photographs if relevant. Be sure to clearly identify the issue and impacts, and provide a contact person. For a small, weekly paper, write the press release in the form of a news story. Understaffed papers, online publications, or the online component of a TV or radio station will often post the article as you write it.

Follow up with phone calls to the news desk or a specific reporter of each outlet, to “pitch” your issue. Focus on elements of the issue that would make a good story and why the reporter should care about this.

Set up a site visit with reporter(s). Offer to take the reporter to the site and recruit people for the reporter to interview.

7. Consider setting up a GoFundMe account or other online crowdsourcing platforms to cover costs of printing, travel, etc.

Identify the Issue in simple language and what the funds will be used for.

Highlight how it will affect the community or individual.

Be accountable to your donors, follow up with an impact report (email, newsletter, etc.) on your progress.

DECISION TIME

Many issues that arise wind up being resolved within a few weeks. This could be due to construction halting or moving forward, a compromise has been reached, or your advocacy group has realized that the situation might not change. For a situation that will require longer-term efforts to address, there will come a time when those involved must decide whether to continue moving forward.

A few basic questions will help the group make that decision:

1. Is there still time to make a difference in the issue at hand?
2. Do we have a core team of committed individuals to lead the long-term initiative?
3. Do we have enough people or organizations interested to be effective?
4. Is there a reasonable expectation that we *can or cannot* make a difference?

One of the most difficult stages of advocating is realizing when to press forward or back away from the project or issue. If you are building momentum and your issue is resonating, continue forward. If your voice has become or “becomes” the lone advocate, or you reach insurmountable opposition, it might be time to back away from the issue. Please know that some issues take years or even decades to make progress for protection – only you can decide if it is time to stay the course.

STAY THE COURSE – Steps for Long-term Advocacy

1. Broaden your organization.

Establish a core working group. Typically, the most engaged members of the organization will form a core working group who direct the actions of the organization. They may be identified as a steering committee or officers of the organization, or they may simply be those individuals most willing/able to concentrate on the issue.

For individuals who are interested, but not willing/able to focus on the project on a day-to-day basis, develop specific actions for them to take. If, for example, you need letters/emails sent to a specific elected official, ask your broader circles to write such a letter, giving them the talking points and how to contact the recipient of the letter/email. Another example might be attending city council meetings, or editing a flyer, or helping with social media.

If you have members who don't have access to a computer or are not familiar with communicating electronically, set up some computers as a central location on a specific day and have people on hand to help them write their letters. One of TCA's board members generated 200 letters in one day that way!

2. Refine your alternatives analysis.

If one or more alternatives to the project you are opposing have emerged as feasible/preferable, expand your analysis of those options through research and consultation with subject-matter experts. Include advocacy for the alternatives with your opposition to the project.

3. Begin recruiting organization members with specific skill sets you need.

Examples of expertise that may be useful: web developers, those familiar with social media, speakers, writers/editors, engineers, biologists or other scientists, business people, people with influence/connections.

4. Seek a champion.

Recruiting a “champion” – an elected official, person of influence in the community, someone with name recognition – can help elevate your issue in the public mind.

5. Look for existing organizations that might take an interest in your issue.

There may be existing organizations (local, city-wide, broader reach) who would take an interest in your issue. Think broadly about the impacts. Don't look only for conservation organizations; seek other groups who might be interested: businesses, civic groups, taxpayers, recreational groups, church groups, neighborhood associations, schools, etc.

6. Hold regular core meetings, take notes, and provide follow-up.

Send emails to attendees and those in your group who couldn't attend summarizing the meeting and noting which team member committed to which action. Keep records of contact information, Action Plans with steps needed/implemented, key correspondence and responses, outcome of meetings with officials and/or organizations, etc. Identify who on the coordinating team will assume primary responsibility for each core function.

7. Seek legal counsel from an established environmental attorney and expert input from other professionals as needed.

Attorneys and experts such as hydrologists, biologists, engineers, and other professionals with relevant expertise will be expensive, but are sometimes a necessity to advocate on complex issues.

8. If the project develops into a long-term effort or requires legal counsel or experts, then be prepared to raise money to cover the costs.

Basic fundraising steps:

- a. Ask participants to contribute financially to the effort. Identify individuals and businesses that are impacted by the issue, as well as civic-minded individuals and groups who might be willing to contribute larger sums to the effort.

Convey a range of funds needed. When making an ask, communicate how much money or range of funds is needed and specifically how the funds will

be used. Don't be shy about asking or about naming an amount. Recruit others to seek donations from a wider range of people. Coach your organization on how to make an ask that would fit (1) the donor's financial capacity and (2) the likely level of interest.

The most fundamental technique: Explain the need, look the person directly in the eye and say, "Would you consider a gift of \$_____ for this effort?" Then say absolutely nothing until the potential donor responds to your question. If you keep talking and explaining, it will make it easy for the person to duck the ask. Wait for them to respond.

Thank the donor!

Important: Show your appreciation for each gift, no matter what the size. Thank/praise those who give. Make it a positive experience for them.

- b. Explore identifying a non-profit organization sympathetic to your effort who might be willing to serve as fiscal agent for your effort. Donations funneled through a non-profit would then be tax-deductible and the accounting process would typically be managed by their staff, with your group informed regularly and frequently.
- c. Be creative about sources of potential donations. For example, one group successfully sought donations of fishing trips, overnight stays in member's cabins, and other items for an online "auction". Rather than putting on a labor-intensive formal auction they set it up as "best offer". For items difficult to ship, they made it clear that the recipient would have to pick the item up. A very popular item was gift cards for restaurants, and local retail outlets that were donated by those businesses. One woman offered to deliver a home-made pie once a month for a year to the highest bidder. Several local musicians offered "house concerts." Keep the list of online items to no more than 25 or 30 and show detailed photos and descriptions of each. You may want to consider limiting those invited to participate in the event to individuals already involved in supporting your project, rather than the general public.



Take Action. Protect Wildlife. 
Texas Conservation Alliance

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