



# INTRODUCTION

NATURAL SETTING • HISTORY • ARCHITECTURE

## INTRODUCTION

Zapata County faces a future with a wide range of options and possibilities. The County possesses important natural and historical resources including Falcon Reservoir, The Rio Grande River, San Ygnacio, and an oil and natural gas industry that supplies jobs and a steady revenue stream to the County. The challenge that lies ahead in these changing times with higher energy prices is to utilize these resources in a way that will provide a sound future for current and future generations.

This future requires the development of a county-wide based planning process and program that involves residents in reviewing alternative strategies and land-use plans for the future. Zapata County leaders have taken the first steps in this direction by initiating a strategic planning process and vision plan development to examine future alternatives for the County. Another important event occurred in June 2007 when Senate Bill 63 was signed. This bill and House Bill 3068 give the County the authority to establish a Falcon Lake Planning Commission (FLPC). The FLPC has the authority to establish zoning regulations for all land located within 25,000 feet of the project boundary line for Falcon Lake and the Rio Grande River. The Vision Plan recommends a preliminary zone definition plan for the towns of Zapata and San Ygnacio.

This report presents a series of options for the future of Zapata County and its towns.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the consultants' experience in working in Zapata County for over the past year and a half. Many of the recommendations are discussed in further detail in the Recommendations chapter of the report.

#### Protect the Arroyos

Arroyos from the northern to southern sectors of the County act as drainage channels flowing into Falcon Reservoir and the Rio Grande River. The arroyos also serve as primary environmental corridors for wildlife and vegetation. The south Texas brush-land (brasada) is a unique natural region that is filled with a wide variety of wildlife and vegetation. The southern reaches of the Rio Grande corridor supports over 1,100 plant and 700 vertebrate species. The riparian woodlands bordering the Rio Grande provides habitat for many rare birds and possibly half of the butterfly species that exist in the United States. Each fall and spring, millions of birds pass through the area on their way to and from Central and South America. Migratory bats and butterflies also use this path. Fishing and bird watching increasingly is becoming more important as a tourism

attraction for the County. The Sierra Club reports that ecotourism brings in over 200,000 visitors and \$125 million annually for wildlife viewing in this corridor. These arroyos act as wildlife habitats and require protection from most forms of development. A natural corridor of at least 200 or more feet may be needed along many of these arroyos. Protection can be developed through acquisition or a combination of local, state, and federal regulations. Another option is conservation easements which allows local ownership of land, but provides long-term protection to the network of corridors. Figure 1.1 shows the extensive network of arroyos that occur throughout Zapata County.

#### Develop and Expand Land-use and Economic Development Planning Capability

Planning is an ongoing and critical process that deals with short and long range needs. This report primarily presents options for a long range view. However, there are constant day to day problems that must be addressed in a very short time frame; where to locate a new resource (ex. telecommunication towers) or locate new facilities (schools, parks, etc.). Planning requires the development of an adequate staff and a data base of information in order to weigh the pros and cons of various options that Zapata County will face. One problem that the consultants encountered was the lack of up-to-date aerial and base maps for the county. New aeriels should be flown at least every three years. Aerials are not only useful for planning efforts but are needed for tax appraisal evaluations, and economic development studies. The County should also work towards the development of an in-house staff and eventual formation of a department with land-use planning expertise.

#### Reestablish a Town Center for Zapata

The relocation of the town of Zapata in the early 1950s resulted in the loss of a definable central place for the community. Old Zapata was a pedestrian oriented town that had a plaza where public buildings, the church and businesses were oriented. Zapata today lacks that place identity and pedestrian feeling that it once possessed. People will walk 1500 feet or more if they are experiencing a town streetscape with interesting things to see and do. Developing a walkable and interesting streetscape is the key to the creation of a successful town center for Zapata. The challenge is to develop a mix and critical mass of governmental, retail, offices, housing, restaurants, education, and entertainment spaces and activities in this central area.

The town center could also function as an entertainment district and setting for festivals and performing arts. Unfortunately, the current plaza west of the courthouse does not function as the hub of the community. Zapata needs places that allow for social gatherings, public festivities, and

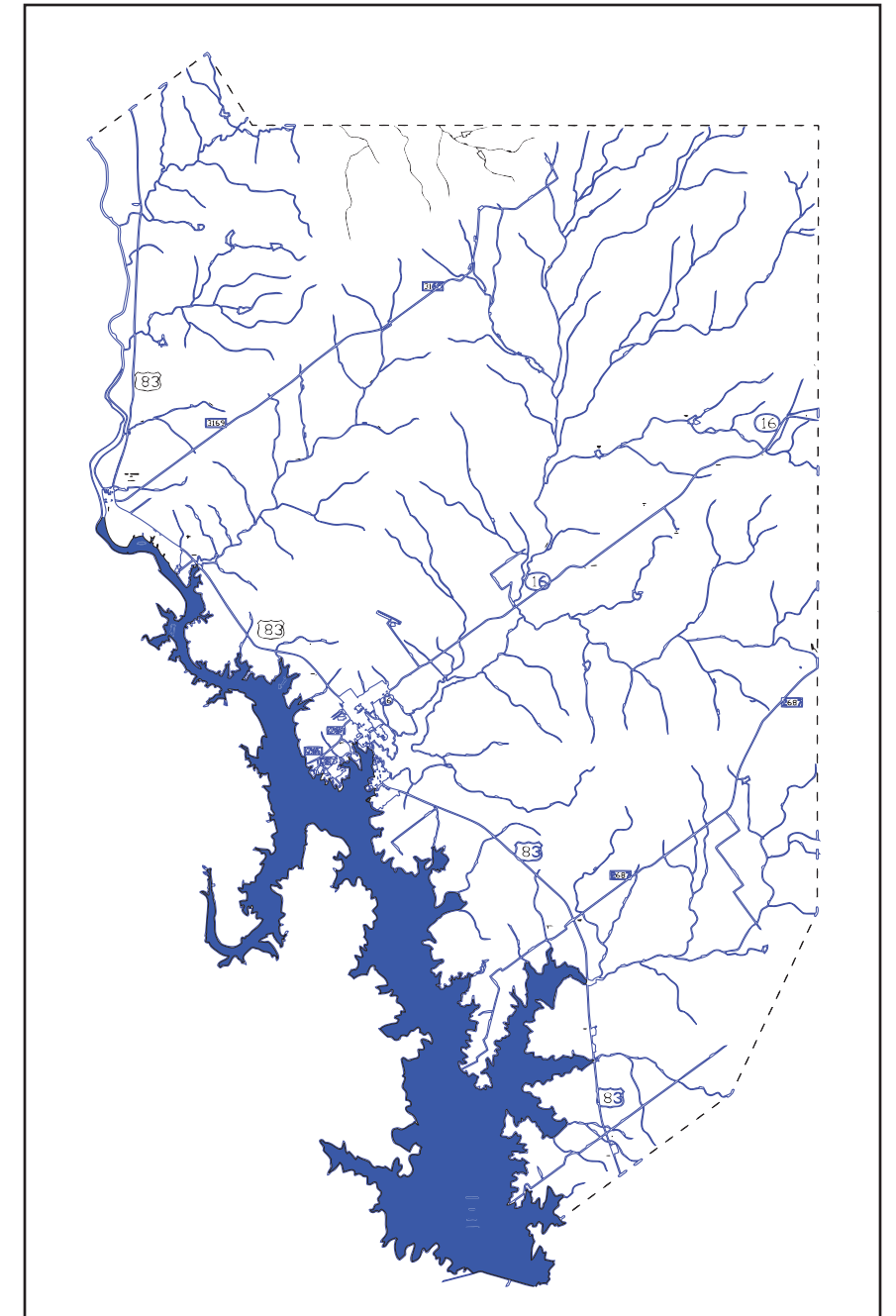


Figure 1.1: Zapata County arroyos.

ceremonies. These places recognized by residents and visitors help to define a coherent image of a town.

The redefinition of central Zapata is needed. This could be accomplished through a series of important steps. The Courthouse Plaza could be expanded by relocating the sheriffs' office. An expanded Plaza would be more visible and usable for a farmers market, festivals, and other community events. The Plaza could link to an expanded and redeveloped Community Center to the west. An outdoor amphitheatre could be built at the west end of the Community Center. A network of shaded streets and plazas would link the Courthouse Plaza, Community Center, Higher Education Center and Museum with shops and offices.

### Preserve San Ygnacio

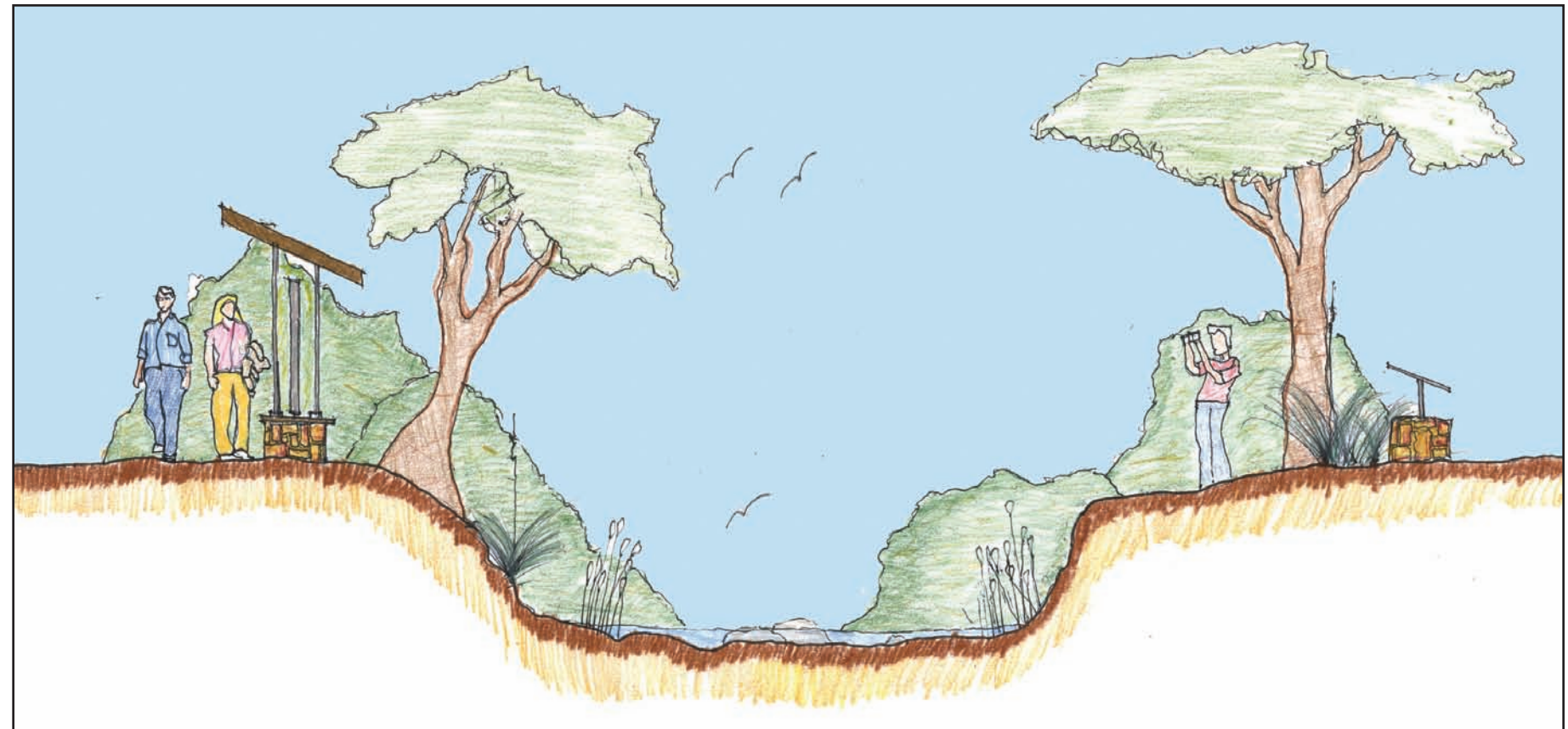
San Ygnacio is a unique historical asset and is an example of a Spanish-Mexican colonial period community that evolved on the Texas frontier. The town offers a historic glimpse into the past that can not be replicated. Change and new development over time occur in every town. The challenge with respect to San Ygnacio is directing and managing change so that the identity and image of the town is not lost in the process. Suggestions for accomplishing that objective are discussed in the Recommendations chapter.

### Preserve Historic Ranches

Some of the earliest Spanish Colonial ranches north of the Rio Grande were established in Zapata County. A few highly significant examples of colonial period ranches, such as Los Corralitos and Rancho La Union, continue to operate as ranches today. These sites provide a rare opportunity to view the evolution of Hispanic ranch architecture and ranching practices over the last 200 years within the context of a working ranch. At Los Corralitos and Rancho La Union historic mesquite fences, *jacals* and stone buildings have been maintained over time and include some of the oldest continuously occupied structures in Texas. These sites can provide unique educational and cultural experiences that deeply and directly connect with Zapata County's ranching past. A challenge will be developing conservation plans for these highly significant sites that thoughtfully consider the complex issues surrounding the preservation of historic structures, their uses and contexts; address important questions such as public access; and encourage the continued economic viability of the ranches.

### Develop Affordable Housing Options

There is an increasing need and demand for affordable housing in Zapata County. The Texas Secretary of State web site identifies 41 colonias in Zapata County. Colonia is derived from the Spanish word for community.



**Figure 1.2: Arroyos act as important wildlife habitats and are potential sites for ecotourism and recreation.**

A colonia is defined as any identifiable community in the border region that lacks a potable water supply, or has an inadequate sewerage system or contains a shortage of decent, safe, and sanitary housing. There is a clear need to develop new strategies for building affordable housing in Zapata County. The challenge is to develop new housing options that are less expensive to build, require less maintenance, and are more energy efficient. One option would be to establish a non-profit housing corporation that could construct demonstration projects.

It is important to invest in good design of housing units. Up to 70 percent of the cost of a house is affected by planning and design decisions. Soft costs (fees, etc.) not directly related to labor and materials generally account for the remaining 30 percent. Design is not only concerned with exterior appearance, but also how to develop the best floor plan and site plan for intended occupants, selecting the best materials and spanning systems and create a unit that fits into the fabric of a town.