

GROWING PAINS IN TEXAS HILL COUNTRY



Studies For Our Global Future

introduction

In discussing the impacts of population growth on society and the environment, we tend to focus on global examples and issues. However, the impacts of population changes are felt most at the local level. In the United States, population growth comes up in issues of urban sprawl, development, sustainable community projects, and a host of other local debates.

San Marcos, Texas is located in an area often referred to as Texas Hill Country. It is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States and has been for some time. But similar growth debates can be seen in many areas throughout the country from central Florida to the mid-Atlantic to the Pacific Northwest. Local population increase and development are complex issues that can offer positive outcomes, such as tourism and economic boosts, but can also put areas at risk of harming the environment or losing some of the aspects that pulled residents to the area in the first place.

Vocabulary: aquifer, urban sprawl, zoning laws

materials

Part 1

- Article: “Growing Pains in America’s Fastest Growing City of San Marcos” (provided)

Part 2

- None

Part 3

- Role-Playing Cards (provided)

Part 1: Read All About It

procedure

1. Go over the following definitions with the class:

Urban sprawl: a land use/development pattern in which the edges of the city grow outward into the surrounding rural or undeveloped areas.

concept

Increase in population size is a factor in local debates about growth, development, and the environment.

objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define urban sprawl.
- Identify three perspectives in debates about local population growth and development.
- Apply problem-solving skills to propose solutions to urban sprawl.
- Use argumentation in a city council debate simulation.

subjects

AP Human Geography, Geography, Environmental Science (General and AP), Government, English Language Arts

skills

Critical thinking, reading comprehension, role playing, writing a position statement, defending a position using evidence, debating

method

Students read a news article about local population growth in San Marcos, TX and the resulting sprawl, then write a proposed solution and simulate a city council debate.

Zoning laws: local laws that divide a city into sections reserved for specific purposes (such as residential, commercial, industrial, or recreational).

Aquifer: an underground deposit of water that feeds wells and springs, can range in size and depth, and can serve as a major source of domestic and agricultural water in many areas.

2. Distribute the article “Growing Pains in America’s Fastest Growing City of San Marcos” to each student and allow them time to read it quietly.

Note: While this article was originally published in 2013, San Marcos still struggles to manage rapid population growth. Between 2013 and 2019, San Marcos grew by 19 percent, gaining over 10,000 new residents.¹ Hill Country cities nearby are also growing quickly. Austin, San Antonio, Georgetown, Round Rock, Cedar Park, and Pflugerville all rank highly on lists of fastest-growing U.S. cities.² For an update on how San Marcos is planning for its future, show this [short news clip on Vision 2025](#), the city’s efforts to engage citizen opinions on how San Marcos grows.

3. In pairs, have students discuss the following:
 - a. What aspects of urban sprawl are mentioned in the article, directly or indirectly?
 - b. How has population growth played a role in how San Marcos has developed?
 - c. Based on the article, do you have a positive or negative view of the changes in San Marcos?

Part 2: Let it be Resolved...

procedure

1. Divide students into four groups.
2. Read the following information aloud to the class:

“You’ve been asked to consult with the San Marcos City Council on the unprecedented growth the city is experiencing. Based on the information found in the news article “Growing Pains in America’s Fastest Growing City of San Marcos,” along with any previous background knowledge you have on sprawl issues, write a proposed resolution for what San Marcos should do about growth. Your group’s resolution should be a short paragraph. Be sure to consider:

- a. If you think that urban sprawl in San Marcos is a problem or an opportunity or some of both.*
 - b. If you think it is an opportunity, pick at least one way that it will benefit the city and write a resolution to encourage growth for that reason.*
 - c. If you think growth will create challenges for your town, pick at least one challenge and write a resolution that includes ideas for solutions.”*
3. Allow time for groups to cooperatively write a resolution. The positions students offer should be well thought out and supported.

Note: If you are concerned that all four groups will create similar resolutions, assign positions to each group and have them write their resolution accordingly. Possible positions include:

- For development of any kind.
- For development but with moderate restrictions.
- Against development except in some instances.
- Against development of any kind.

4. Write or project the four action statements on the board.

Part 3: Debating the City's Future

procedure

1. Before starting this simulation you may want to have students investigate the functioning of their own local government. Is there a mayor and city council, a board of trustees, a county executive, or other form of a legislative body?
2. Explain to students that they will now take on the role of San Marcos residents attending a city council meeting where the future of the city's growth will be discussed. They will be asked to consider the various resolutions created in Part 2.
3. Assign five students to be on the city council and assign one of them to be the president.
4. Divide the remaining students into ten groups and distribute one Role-Playing Card to each group. One student within each group will act as the person on the card and the rest of the students will be their support team.
5. Explain the simulation:

"For this city council meeting, we will begin by having the city council president call the meeting to order and read the four resolutions out loud. The president will then call on each of the speakers to make a presentation of five minutes or less, arguing for one of the four resolutions, and will invite additional comments from the audience. After hearing from all of those who wish to speak, the members of the council will vote on the resolution."

6. Prepare for the simulation: Give students time with their group to study their role and determine which of the four resolutions (displayed from Part 2) they intend to support. During this time, the five city council members should look over all of the Role-Playing Cards to familiarize themselves with their constituents. They should also consider possible issues that may arise or think of questions they may want to ask.
7. Conduct the simulation: The president now calls the meeting to order, reads the four resolutions aloud, and calls on each of the speakers to make their presentation in turn, allowing them five minutes to convince the council to vote in their favor. The president will then invite additional comments from the audience. Those wishing to speak should raise their hands and then wait until the president calls on them.
8. Conclude the simulation with a vote by the five council members on the four resolutions and a discussion on the outcome of the activity.

discussion questions

1. Which group had the most persuasive testimony and what made it so?

Answers will vary.

2. Is there any additional information you would have liked to have prior to the debate? If yes, what information?

Answers will vary. Some students might have found it helpful to see information on how other cities have dealt with growth and sprawl, actual costs associated with the various resolutions, or photographs/maps/diagrams of the area in question.

assessment

Students create a word web around the core idea of “Urban Sprawl.” They should be sure to include both positive and negative aspects related to sprawl and connect outer concepts with each other as well.

follow-up activities

1. Students compare the information provided in the news article with other mediums (podcast, TV news report, memoir, photo collage, infographics, etc.) of conveying information. Ask them to assess if having the information presented in a different way would have changed their opinion on sprawl.

Samples:

- Podcast – [Protecting The Hill Country’s Scenic Beauty from Suburban Sprawl](#), from the Texas Public Radio podcast “The Source”
- Infographics: [Austin Traffic – The Bottom Line](#), from [dailyinfographic.com](#); [Why We Love Austin](#), from Realty Austin

2. If you live in or near an area experiencing sprawl, have students keep a scrapbook of newspaper and magazine clippings related to the changes your area is going through. When the scrapbook is compiled, students can consider the following questions:

- How has your community’s land use changed over time?
- Do the changes in land use impact other communities in the area? How?
- Do the changes in land use impact the environment in any ways? How?
- How does your community compare with the rest of the country or world in regards to sprawl and sprawl-related issues?

¹ Warner, J. (2020, May 21). DATA: Population Growth for San Marcos Mirrors Hays County Increase since 2010 Census. *Community Impact Newspaper*. Retrieved from <https://communityimpact.com/austin/san-marcos-buda-kyle/government/2020/05/21/data-population-growth-for-san-marcos-mirrors-hays-county-increase-since-2010-census/>

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2020, May 21). Southern and Western Regions Experienced Rapid Growth This Decade. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/south-west-fastest-growing.html>

Growing Pains in America's Fastest-Growing City of San Marcos

By Holly Heinrich

San Marcos, Texas is the fastest-growing city in the nation, in a rapidly-growing state, and with that growth comes concerns over balancing development with environmental and ecological needs.

Tensions over development exist in communities across the country, but they are amplified in San Marcos, which is home to approximately 50,000 people, and a number of endangered species, including rare salamanders and golden-cheeked warblers. The growth in San Marcos has been a source of conflict among residents, as well as a source of pride.

Some residents see the city's real estate development as an economic opportunity, and necessary to house the growing student population of Texas State University. Others say that new student housing developments are eroding the character of the town they love, and damaging the area's fragile natural environment.

San Marcos is a unique community for additional reasons. Some Texas State professors are seeking UNESCO World Heritage status for the town, on the basis that it is believed to be the oldest continuously habited place in North America.

Then there are the geologic factors. The area is home to Edwards Aquifer, a natural groundwater system that supplies drinking and other water to approximately two million people, including the residents of San Antonio and San Marcos. In an area known as the recharge zone, rain refills the aquifer by percolating through interconnected holes and fractures in its porous limestone karst. Pollutants can also enter the aquifer through the same process. According to the Texas State Edwards Aquifer Research and Data Center, the Edwards Aquifer is home to the most diverse known groundwater ecosystem in the world, and numerous endangered species.

Two sites that have been slated for private student housing development here — one where development has been postponed for three years, and another where plans are moving forward — illustrate the tug-of-war over development that has been occurring in San Marcos.

A Tale of Two Neighborhoods

The first is Sessom Creek, a leafy neighborhood in a sloping ravine. There, residents collected a petition with over 2,000 signatures to oppose rezoning plans, which would have allowed a local developer to build an 800-bedroom apartment complex. (The San Marcos City Council rejected the developer's proposal, and set a three-year waiting period before new rezoning proposals can be submitted for the area.)

The second is the Buie Tract, a property located at 1400 Craddock Avenue, where Capstone Collegiate Properties has received city approval to build an 899-bedroom student apartment complex.



Photo Credit: Holly Heinrich / StateImpact Texas

The Aquarena Center, an educational center at the headwaters of the San Marcos River.

Like Sessom Creek, local residents and activists have contested development plans for the Buie Tract, both out of environmental concerns, and because many feel that college students do not make good neighbors. Some residents who live near the complexes say that their college-age neighbors have [been disruptive and left messes on their front lawns], filled up residential street parking on weekend nights, and even driven pickup trucks into apartment complex swimming pools. As a result, new proposals for student housing developments are frequently unpopular among nearby homeowners.



Photo credit: Melissa Derrick

A day at the Retreat, a private student housing complex in San Marcos.

San Marcos activists Jay Hiebert and Melissa Derrick shared these stories with StateImpact Texas [the publisher of this article]. But they also say that land clearing on the Buie Tract has likely damaged the property's fragile environment.

According to Hiebert, a Texas State adjunct instructor, and Derrick, a life coach and Texas State employee, the Buie Tract is (or once was) home to endangered golden-cheeked warblers, as well as caves and karst features that allow rain to recharge the Edwards Aquifer. Derrick and Hiebert say that development threatens the warblers' habitat, and bulldozing on the property has filled in caves and karst features.

A Growing City Gets More Attention

"I'm hoping this is going to turn out to be a positive story," Matthew Lewis, San Marcos' Director of Planning & Development Services, told StateImpact Texas. "San Marcos doesn't need any more negative press."

Lewis feels that the attention given to community protests over the Buie Tract and Sessom Creek obscures positive efforts to develop San Marcos. He points to Vision San Marcos, a recently released city development plan, as an example.

Part of the plan involves encouraging growth in San Marcos' revitalized downtown, and other areas identified as "buildable," rather than environmentally sensitive areas like Sessom Creek. The city has a streamlined permitting process for developers who plan to construct vertical, mixed-use buildings up to five stories high in the downtown area — which would be not unlike a plan for a multi-story apartment complex with businesses underneath.

A View of the River

The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment has partnered with the TCEQ to develop a watershed protection plan for the San Marcos River. Researchers are currently collecting data to inform the plan, but in subsequent years, that environmental data will be used to develop and implement watershed protection plans.

As San Marcos and other Texas cities continue to grow, are more conflicts over growth and environmental protection likely to arise?

“Development will inevitably increase, [and with that], the potential conflicts between the development and the environment will increase,” said Andrew Sansom, the Meadows Center’s Executive Director and the founder of the Parks & Wildlife Foundation of Texas. “But I’m also optimistic that the community has come together to create a watershed protection system which will give us the best chances of preserving the resources of the community.”

He expects to see more and more efforts to protect important pieces of land, especially recharge areas for the springs and critical watershed zones. In the last few years, he added, Hays County has spent over \$30 million to acquire land in watershed and recharge areas.

The river has both environmental and economic value for the city of San Marcos — every year, visitors and locals alike come to swim and tube in its waters. For people who have spent time there, the San Marcos River often takes on an emotional significance as well.

“San Marcos is a city that is, in my mind, uniquely sensitive to the river, which is its core,” Sansom said. “The clear, flowing San Marcos River is a core value and a part of the city’s identity.”

This article has been modified for space and content purposes. Access full article here: <https://stateimpact.npr.org/texas/2013/08/12/growing-pains-in-americas-fastest-growing-city-of-san-marcos/>

GROWING PAINS IN TEXAS HILL COUNTRY | role-playing cards

You are a **wildlife biologist** that specializes in endangered birds.

When you first moved to San Marcos in 1985, it was to take a job with the state government environmental association studying golden-cheeked warblers, an endangered species. Right away you knew you were in a special place with access to a special animal; golden-cheeked warblers are only found in Central Texas. Since you've moved here, the warbler has lost more than half of its home range to urban sprawl and development projects. The vast tracts of juniper and hardwood forests are quickly turning into suburbs, or being cut into chunks too small for the bird to survive.

You are a **parent of a family** with three children.

You first moved to San Marcos to earn your PhD in computer science from Texas State University. The tech industry was exploding in Central Texas, with more and more companies relocating to the area. You wanted to be where the jobs were. Now you, your spouse, and three kids aged 13, 8, and 2 live in a quiet neighborhood with a nice yard just outside downtown. You have a commute to get to work, but like living in a family community with lots of green space. You often have other families over for weekend barbecues and play dates with the kids under the shade of the big live oak trees in your yard.

Your family has lived in San Marcos for **three generations**.

You grew up in the historic Dunbar neighborhood, one mile from city center and the heart of the Black community in San Marcos for over a century. In the last couple decades, the growing population in San Marcos made living in Dunbar more expensive. Many Black families sold their homes, moved outside of town, and the Dunbar neighborhood is changing. You'd love to see city officials invest in Dunbar to support long-time residents staying in the community.

You **own a popular restaurant** in San Marcos.

Growth has been good for you because more people have meant more business. In fact, you're hoping to expand your business and open two additional locations over the next two years. For months you've been researching where in the city to locate the new restaurants. After much thought, you've determined you'll be most successful if you put one in the downtown area and one in the Buie Tract area, which is close to a lot of student housing for TSU.

You are a **groundwater geologist**.

You know that as the population of San Marcos grows, water may be withdrawn from the Edwards Aquifer at a faster rate than it will be replaced. You also know that there is a greater risk of the aquifer becoming polluted, which would threaten the city's primary source of water.

You are in your mid-twenties and a **water sports enthusiast**.

Three years ago you moved to San Marcos because of your love of water sports. You opened a small tube rental business for fellow water enthusiasts that want to float down the river. Over the last few years, you've noticed more and more houses popping up along stretches of river that were once wild. As San Marcos grows, business is booming, but you're also worried about the natural state of the river.

You are a **real estate developer** who purchased land on the edge of San Marcos.

Now that there is a strong demand, you want to build attractive, reasonably priced houses on your new land and then sell them at a profit. They will enable many families to realize the American dream – a home of one's own in a pleasant community. Building the homes will also provide jobs for local workers for several years. The new homeowners will pay city property taxes averaging \$1,400 a year and will shop at local businesses, thus helping the local economy.

You are an incoming **freshman at Texas State University**.

You've always wanted to go to college and TSU offers everything you were hoping for – it's a reasonable price, it offers the major you want, and you hear the new dorms provide a fun social scene. An added bonus is that it's located in San Marcos which is small enough to be comfortable but also close enough to both Austin and San Antonio that you can easily get to a big city when you want.

You **commute every day** to work at a retail shop on the other side of the city from where you live.

Eight years ago you moved out of San Antonio to escape the big city life. You chose to move to San Marcos where things moved a bit slower and there was less congestion. Every morning you must drive from your home on one side of the city to the other side of the city where you work. The amount of time it takes to drive has increased dramatically as the city has grown. More and more stop signs, street lights, and cars keep popping up along your route in places that were once rural.

You **own a small hardware store** near downtown

You were born and raised in San Marcos, and run the small hardware store that your mother started decades ago. Big, national chains like Home Depot and Lowe's have recently moved into the newly developed areas on the outskirts of town. Your customers have been traveling farther for what they need. More people should mean more business, but you're worried you'll lose your customers to these big chains.