

Retiree gives small ranch for conservation use; Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust to preserve property.

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SEGUIN - Swarms of butterflies light upon Queen Ann's lace and Indian blanket flowers in a pasture on a small ranch along the Guadalupe River. It could be any one of dozens of ranches in the river valley, but with one big difference. You can be sure that decades from now, this spot still will be a field covered with wildflowers and butterflies.

The owner, a retired nurse who asked to remain anonymous, signed the papers Monday giving away the rights to develop the property to the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, which will preserve the land. "What I see happening so much is development that is eroding the land and driving out the wildlife and things that are natural," she said. "I just did not want that to ever happen to this land. I want it to be here for future generations."

The river trust was formed by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority to protect land in the river watershed from development. Undeveloped land can serve as a buffer, filtering polluted water before it enters the river.

Although it was founded in 2001, the trust is just now completing its first transactions, signing conservation easements to protect this 100-acre ranch in Seguin, adjacent to the Randolph AFB Auxiliary Field, and a second 100-acre ranch near Cuero.

The retired nurse donating the conservation easement can remain on the land until she dies, at which point the trust will take possession of the property. "I'm not married, and I have no children," she said. "I wanted to make sure it would go to people I trusted to take care of it."

The more common way for these transactions to work is for the owner to donate the rights to develop the property, but the owners and their heirs keep possession of the land. The donation ensures the land will stay in its current state, while allowing it to be used for ranching or farming. The family that donates the land receives a large break for estate taxes, because donating the easement reduces the market value of the land by 60 to 70 percent in most cases.

Donating a conservation easement is a way for farm and ranching families to keep the property in the family instead of having estate taxes force heirs to sell at least a portion of the land to pay taxes.

The donor of the Seguin tract said she swam in the river, caught fish and camped on its banks with her parents as a child. The tract has about 1,200 feet of frontage on the Guadalupe River. "It was a wonderful experience," she said. "My mom and dad were both outdoors people. That is why they bought this. It is about as rustic as you can find."

Todd Votteler, executive director of the river trust, commented on the giant cottonwood trees in the heavily forested area near the riverbank. "You can see why we were interested in it," he said. "It's a gorgeous piece of property." Protecting some of the wild areas along the river is vital to preserving the river itself, Votteler said.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from 1982 to 1997, 2.6 million acres of Texas rural land was converted to urban uses, and the rate is accelerating.