

Caves' face-lift to allow rainwater into aquifer



Nico Hauwert, a senior environmental scientist for Austin's Watershed Protection Department, looks at temporary wooden structures put in decades ago to help keep sediment and people out of caves in the Blowing Sink Preserve off Brodie Lane near Bowie High School. Crews will spend about two months building concrete chimneys anchored in the caves. PHOTOS BY LAURA SKELDING / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Austin council OKs spending \$246,000 for concrete chimneys as deep as 50 feet.

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Five caves tucked in a South Austin preserve will get a \$246,000 face-lift to allow more rainwater to pass through them and into the aquifer that feeds Barton Springs.

The Austin City Council approved the spending on Thursday.

Crews will spend about two months building what are essentially concrete chimneys anchored as deep as 50 feet into the caves.

"These (caves) are really outstanding features of getting water into the aquifer," said Nico Hauwert, a senior environmental scientist for the city's Watershed Protection Department.



Volunteers built temporary wooden structures on sinkholes leading to the caves to keep people out, but those have since deteriorated. The structures have since plugged the entrance to some of the caves.

Wind energy contracts

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Located in the 167-acre Blowing Sink Preserve off Brodie Lane near Bowie High School, the caves have attracted spelunkers in the past; in 1991, authorities

took three hours to rescue a trapped University of Texas student. Since then, the property was bought by the city and a barbed-wire fence was erected to keep the public out, though that hasn't stopped all would-be trespassers. Volunteers built temporary wooden

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Structures keep out sediment

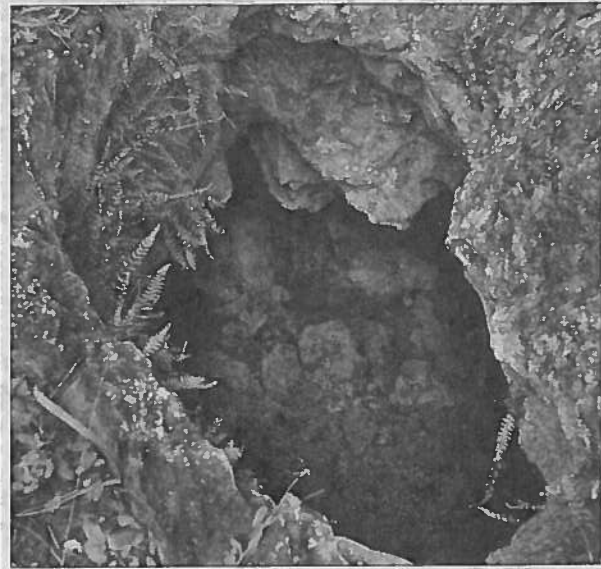
Caves

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structures on the sink-holes leading to the caves to keep people out, but those have since deteriorated. The structures were also meant to help keep rocks and debris out, but they have since plugged the entrance to some of the caves, Hauwert said.

The concrete structures give a permanent fix, keeping out all the sediment that can block water from passing through the caves. A locked door on top of the chimneys will keep people out while letting researchers and others in as needed.

The Winter Woods Cave has seen some of the worst damage over the years. Around the sink-hole leading into the cave, an area about 25 feet in diameter has sunken about 5 feet. If the area continues to sink, the cave entrance could collapse, cutting off water into the aquifer.



There was once a gate over this cave entrance, causing a bat colony to leave. That gate was removed and one surrounding the cave was built. The city hopes the bats will eventually return. LAURA SKELDING / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The land is part of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, more than 30,000 acres in different places in Travis County acquired since 1996 to protect 35 rare and endangered species such as the golden-cheeked warbler and Jollyville Plateau salamander.

The caves are also home to numerous rare species of beetles, spiders, millipedes, Hauwert said.

The council awarded the contract for building

the chimneys to Manchaca-based Zara Environmental. The project will be complicated by the depth and the environmental sensitivity of the site and protections that require federal-government-issued permits for people working on the site. Workers also will have to be trained in working in dark, narrow shafts underground.

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