

Opinion: Retooling a Depression-era program could boost Houston parks and conservation

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— One of the Civilian Conservation Corps., cabins in Bastrop on Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020.
Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The greater Houston area is home to hundreds of parks and green spaces and many miles of hike-and-bike trails. Throughout the pandemic, the public flocked to green spaces to find sanity and enjoy the outdoors. We continue to see high usage in our region's green spaces and current funding mechanisms may not be enough to meet the demand for much needed maintenance and redevelopment projects.

This is not a phenomenon unique to our region. Parks, forests, prairies and other green spaces across the country are also seeing increased usage and a growing public interest for even more outdoor space. To meet this challenge, we need bold action at the federal level to support expansion and redevelopment of America's outdoors. We've seen bold action taken at the federal level before through Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. Nicknamed "Roosevelt's Tree Army," we have the CCC to thank for 711 state parks, 3.5 billion trees, 13,000 miles of trails and other noteworthy accomplishments, such as the Big Bend National Park. The New Deal CCC lasted just nine years before it was discontinued in 1942.

It is time once again to invest in advancing conservation efforts at a national level. There is an undeniable, nonpartisan value in a new civilian conservation corps that benefits our environment, economy and everyday lives. The Houston Parks Board is heartened that the current administration and Congress are exploring ways to invest in our nation's parks and green spaces, including the call for creating a Civilian Climate Corps to activate the next generation of Americans to restore public lands and waters. Congress has included the Civilian Climate Corps into the latest version of the historic of Build Back Better tax package. As the details of the Climate Corps are finalized, we implore Congress to use the provisions and framework from S. 1370/H.R. 3220 the Restore Employment in Natural and Environmental Work (RENEW) Conservation Corps Act as the foundation for the Climate Corps program.

Supported by the Sierra Club, National Resources Defense Council, National Audubon, Student Conservation Association, Trust for Public Land and others, the RENEW Conservation Corps Act takes on the important work of rescuing, stimulating and restoring our natural resources. Should the Climate Corps adopt the RENEW CCC's framework, funding would be directly available to entities on the ground most familiar with the projects and communities that require attention. These entities include conservation organizations, volunteer conservation corps, land trusts, local governments, nonprofits and park districts. The infusion of funding coupled with a new national conservation workforce will have a very real impact on the conservation efforts in the greater Houston area. Organizations like ours could not only move quickly to address local conservation and maintenance projects, but our regional partners will also benefit from added support to conserve and maintain parks, prairies and wetlands as we work together to protect the diverse ecoregions in the area. As the BBB package moves through the process, Houston Parks Board sincerely hopes that the Civilian Climate Corps' structure and goals mirror those outlined in the RENEW Conservation Corps Act.

As FDR once said, "The forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people." Supporting a new conservation corps is a timely and critically needed investment in the Houston region's parks, trails, treasured green spaces and people.

White is president and CEO of Houston Parks Board.