Summary for NWACA – City of Austin Deer Information Meeting – September 8, 2010

About 25 people gathered on September 8,2010 for a forum on living with the deer in Austin, hosted by the City of Austin (COA) Health Department, Rodent and Vector Control Program. The session included a brief presentation by Kelly Bender, an Urban Wildlife Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife (TXPWD), followed by an hour of questions and answers.

Following Kelly's presentation, two representatives from Plateau Land and Wildlife Management, the organization hired by the City of Austin to perform a deer census in the 78731 zip code area, answered questions about their methods and plans. Members of the COA Health Department also on hand answered questions about the No Feeding Ordinance.

Kelly Bender has 15 years of experience with urban wildlife, and she is the author of a book about Texas wildscapes titled *Gardening for Wildlife.* She approaches her work from both an understanding of the biology of the animals and a deep appreciation for them. Kelly's brief initial remarks highlighted that both TXPWD and COA are working to help neighborhoods like ours establish a good balance in living with wildlife in our area. With respect to the deer population, she pointed out that developing our neighborhoods has altered the original landscape, removing a natural system of wildlife checks and balances. Where predators like wolves and fox might have helped maintain a healthy number of deer for the habitat before, their disappearance coupled with human feeding of the deer has put the population on a tremendous growth curve.

Her message was clearly stated: the strongest action we can take now to reduce the size of the deer herd in our neighborhoods is to stop humans from feeding the deer. Human feeding provides the does with an unusually high calorie diet, which causes them to give birth every year (rather than a normal birth cycle of alternate years), and to have more twin births than is normal. Eliminating human feeding will reduce the number of fawns born each year to a normal range, which along with natural attrition will bring the numbers down. This will take time, though, and patience will be required, along with vigilance in observing the No Feeding Ordinance. She noted that the guidance from PETA is right in line with this; their number one recommendation to manage urban deer populations is to enforce a No Feeding Ordinance in cities with a large number of deer in urban areas.

In response to questions about how TXPWD and others determine what constitutes a healthy number of deer in an area, she and others at the session described two types of surveys: browse surveys of vegetation in the local natural habitat and census surveys of the deer in the area. The browse surveys examine three levels of vegetation – preferred (like red oak), mid-range, and not preferred (like juniper, agarita bushes, and live oak). Where there are more deer than the habitat can effectively carry, this type of survey finds extensive bite marks and evidence of browsing on the not-preferred vegetation. This kind of browsing indicates that the habitat is stressed beyond its carrying capacity. Common guidance about the carrying capacity in this part of Texas is about 7 to 15 acres of vegetation per deer.

Various approaches exist for doing a deer census, the most common of which is to divide the area being measured into segments and counting the deer in each segment, several times in general, very early in the day or very late in the day. A method like this will be used in the 78731 area, using a representative sample of survey areas. (Further information about the methods and the results of the survey will be reported to the NWACA community in the near future.)

During the question and answer portion of the discussion, Kelly was asked about other ways to reduce the number of deer in the herd. Some neighbors asked about the possibility of birth control for the deer. Kelly pointed out that this is currently quite difficult for both the deer and the people. Each doe needs to be dosed every 2 years for the birth control to be effective, and at least 70% of the does in the herd need to be included. The process requires injecting them with the birth control medication and tagging their ears to show they've been dosed. This treatment is very traumatic for the deer, and it costs about $700/deer to provide such a dose.

Asked about the possibility of relocating the deer, Kelly said that was problematic in several ways. When granting a permit for relocation, TXPWD requires that the receiver be someone with a deer management program, to ensure the deer will be adequately cared for. However, the trapping and transport operation results in high mortality, so it's generally not a useful option. Trapping prior to transport generally is an attended operation; she described a drop net as one way this is done.

In response to several questions about how removal of some deer in Northwest Hills might be handled, Kelly reiterated that nobody is at the point of such action. There is work underway to understand how many deer there are, and how that relates to the carrying capacity of the habitat in the area. The survey being done by Plateau is getting such data. With the data in hand, the community and the City need to consider the options available for responsible action. A first useful step is to stop feeding the deer.

Several neighbors described challenging interactions they had with deer, including times when pets were attacked or when they were stalked by deer while walking a dog. Kelly pointed out that these were likely to happen if a doe was protecting a fawn (whether or not we could see it at the time), or during rutting season when bucks were protecting their turf. Aggressive responses are especially likely when deer are crowded into a small geographic area. In her guidance for how to react, she pointed out that deer are not predators, but prey. Thus, the guidance for how to approach a bear doesn't apply to deer – that is, don't make loud noises and advance on the deer; they are likely to react in an aggressive way. Rather, maintain eye contact and back away slowly from the deer. In addition, avoid walking dogs off leash, since they may inadvertently trigger an aggressive reaction. Times of the year to be especially sensitive to aggressive behavior include the rutting season (generally late October into November) and the fawning season in early Spring. Time frames vary, though, as urban deer may have additional conception cycles.

Questions about how to limit destruction of landscaping led to guidance that we use native plants, which have adapted to the wildlife around us. In addition, Kelly cautioned against overwatering, since the deer love the fresh young growth on many plants.

Concerns about removal of coyotes were raised. That removal was in response to neighbors in Northwest Austin asking for such action, but the consequence has been a change in the wildlife balance –not only for deer, but for rats, the primary diet staple for coyotes. Kelly pointed out that data about coyote populations shows that when the population is stressed, their litters tend to about double in size. When coyotes start appearing in urban areas, they tend to be aggressive, so anyone sighting one should report it to the City of Austin, calling 3-1-1. Note that mature coyotes are generally about 45 pounds in weight, so beware of mistaking a large dog for a coyote.

City staff responded to questions about the effectiveness of the No Feeding Ordinance, in effect since February, 2009. The ordinance is complaint-driven, with a maximum fine of $125. If a citizen witnesses someone feeding deer, they can file a complaint in Municipal Court and bring evidence such as photos, or they can call Rodent and Vector Control to have staff observe the feeding. For the City to issue a citation, the staff must witness somebody feeding the deer or see evidence of food being provided to the deer. During 2009, there were 32 complaints of deer feeding on 18 addresses, and there have been 17 reports filed in 2010 thus far on 13 addresses. Thus far, 4 citations have been issued, 2 of which were dismissed after mediation. [data verified and updated on 9/13]

The representatives from Plateau Land and Wildlife Management answered several detailed questions about the survey they are conducting. At this point, they have planned their approach, identifying counting area samples that range across the 6300-acre 78731 zip code area. Over the next several weeks, they will be driving through the selected areas early in the day and late in the day, doing a count of the deer they see and measuring the sizes of the sampled areas. Each area will be counted 4 times – twice in the morning and twice in the evening. Questions about deer traveling between areas were answered with assurances that the method avoided double counting. It was also pointed out that the home range of a male deer is about 1 mile, and a doe about half that; deer don't generally wander over large distances in their habitat.

Plateau will be doing their work by daylight, to avoid shining spotlights into any part of the neighborhood. (Spotlight counts are often done in rural areas). Using this data, they will estimate the total number of deer in this zip code area and review that against the carrying capacity guidelines. They expect to complete their report by the end of September and provide the data and recommendations to City staff, which in turn will report to City management and City Council. What happens after that is yet to be determined, but information will be provided to concerned citizens. Among the options under discussion is a meeting in the NWACA neighborhood with City staff after the Plateau report is finished, to talk about the findings and recommendations, and to discuss the general matter of re-establishing a balance with wildlife in the neighborhood.