

Master Plan Highlighted

By David Bloch

Our new master plan, the *Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan*, evoked expressions of admiration and dismay earlier this year from participants in the UT and *American Statesman's* Growth Symposium. The admiration was for the farsightedness of the plan, the dismay because of some of the antediluvian practices that were still occurring despite the plan's existence. The plan is a good one. But a master plan is like a little constitution: it is not self-enforcing. It provides a standard against which policies and ordinances can be measured and their validity tested. It is up to us to see that the objectives of the master plan are realized. The following paragraphs are a brief sketch of the plan, highlighting aspects that are of special concern to the members of the Save Barton Creek Association.

The plan consists of four chapters and an appendix. Chapter I, "Austin Tomorrow," deals with the plan's history. It stresses citizen involvement in the Austin Tomorrow Program and the Goals Assembly. It describes the process by which the goals were formulated and translated into a working document. It gives legitimacy to the plan, by establishing its grassroots base.

Chapter II enumerates "Goals, Objectives and Policies" in broad terms. It would be useless to try to mention all that are relevant to our interests, but the first objective and policy set the tone: "Objective 111.0. Ensure the compatibility between potential development and the existing natural environment. Policy 111.1. Establish special districts based on unique environmental features and apply development standards appropriate to each area."

Chapter III, "Developmental Suitability," is full of attractive maps: hydrological, geological, economic, jurisdictional, soil, neighborhoods, overlays. The chapter describes geographic areas, their limitations, sensitivities, and a variety of developmental techniques — roadway design for example — appropriate to different environmental and other concerns, such as protecting watersheds, encouraging public transportation, and the like. It is prefaced by some broad and important concepts. "By emphasizing development within the city limits, growth could be deflected from environmentally sensitive areas to the east and west, allowing more efficient provision of municipal services." This one statement of intent sets the stage for preserving the environ-
(Continued on Page 4)

MASTER PLAN

(Continued from Page 3)

ment, providing public transportation, and doing both in an economical way. The chapter is essentially an elaboration of this concept.

Chapter IV, "Growth Management," holds the key to Austin's future. The decisions Austin makes during the next couple of years, with the Master Plan in front of us, will establish precedents for its future. And these policies will evolve through implementation of the plan. "This Comprehensive Plan . . . is not a product, but a part of a process in which the public will continue to be included."

Chapter IV describes five types of areas in terms of growth priority. Priority Area I, the highest priority, is the central city. Priority Area II lies within the city limits as of 1977. Area III, the Growth Corridor outside the city, extends north and south of the city limits along Interstate 35. Areas IV and V have lowest priority for growth. These are environmentally sensitive areas, and include the Lake Austin watershed, Barton Creek watershed, and Edwards Aquifer Recharge and Contributing Zones. At least some members of the City Council feel that some commitment to growth in Area IV has already been made, particularly in the Williamson Creek watershed. Whether this commitment is to be grudgingly or enthusiastically acknowledged, or even repudiated, undoubtedly will be hotly debated.

The plan enumerates development standards for Areas IV and V. Regarding Edwards Aquifer recharge: "Development in this zone should not contribute to any increase in the pollution of surface or groundwater above that expected to occur in the natural undisturbed state. Impervious surfaces in the zone should be minimized in order to permit storm water runoff infiltration to the aquifer." Explicit? Yes. But on the previous page the plan states that these standards are to be *considered*, not mandated. The City Council's recent decisions encouraging development in the Williamson Creek watershed indicate that it may be content to follow the plan's fine print rather than its broad intent. If the Council persists in its efforts to provide utilities and approve new subdivisions in Area IV, its disregard of the plan's intent will be obvious.

The Master Plan has the status of a resolution, not an ordinance, and its legal enforceability is uncertain. One of the Association's major accomplishments last year was the adoption of the Barton Creek Ordinance, a signal example of how the Master Plan ought to be im-

plemented. Similar ordinances are now needed to extend this protection to the other creeks that drain across the Edwards Aquifer outcrop.

The Plan's appendix, "Implementation, Policies, Ordinances, Programs," cites the source of the city's authority for formulating and implementing the plan, describes the city's areas of jurisdiction, and identifies various tools for implementation, including zoning, subdivision regulation, annexation policies, watershed protection, groundwater protection, and capital improvement programs.

The *Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan* represents the apogee of citizen involvement in planning for the future. No doubt the plan will be difficult and expensive to implement, but the cost of ignoring it, in dollars, lost resources, and political consequences, is both entirely predictable and enormous.

SOUTHWEST AREA REPORT

by Ken Manning

What Moratorium?

After over two months of actively pressuring the City Council to address the issue of development controls in the Williamson, Slaughter, Bear, and Onion Creek Watersheds, limited progress is being made. These four watersheds supply about 70 percent of the recharge to the Edwards Aquifer which feeds Barton Springs. Consequently, the water quality in these watersheds must be protected if Barton Springs is to remain relatively unpolluted.

In late June the Association in a press conference urged the City Council to impose a moratorium on further subdivision activity in these watersheds. The Association cited figures documenting the rush of activity by developers to get subdivisions approved in this area prior to any moratorium or controls. The City Council left the door open for this land rush to continue by giving the staff 30 days to come back with a report on the issue. Six weeks later the staff produced a report that recommended against a moratorium; in its place the staff proposed \$307,000 in emergency expenditures to upgrade water service to that area to alleviate water pressure deficiencies.

The Association responded with a highly critical analysis of the staff report and renewed its request for a

moratorium on August 21. A public hearing on the issue was subsequently scheduled by the City Council for September 11. The hearing was heavily attended by members of the Homebuilders Association in opposition to the moratorium as well as a large number of citizens supporting the moratorium. At the close of the hearing on Thursday the Council scheduled action for the following Monday.

The vote on a moratorium provided strange alignments. A one-time, 30-day moratorium on the Williamson Creek watershed was approved 4 to 3. Supporting the moratorium were Cooke, Himmelblau, Mullen, and Trevino. Trevino commented that 30 days was too short. Goodman, Snell, and McClellan opposed even a 30-day moratorium. A 60-day moratorium was approved for Slaughter and Bear Creeks by a 5 to 2 vote. Cooke and Trevino opposed it on the ground that 60 days was too short a period of time.

The unacceptably short time frames were a result of developer pressure. In addition, at the Monday Council session the chambers were packed with construction workers who were still being paid by their employers. They had been told (falsely) that their jobs were in jeopardy if a moratorium passed.

The Williamson Creek moratorium had to pass on two more readings to take effect since it only received four votes. On second reading the moratorium did not pass when Himmelblau abstained, ostensibly because Goodman (who opposed the moratorium) wanted it postponed until he could attend any discussion. Cooke and Trevino argued that it should be passed on second reading with further discussion on third reading. As a result, there is still no moratorium in the watershed where subdivision filings by developers are continuing at a ridiculous pace.

A severe shortcoming of the proposed moratorium is that it would exempt all subdivisions which have received preliminary approval. This is a critical concern in the Williamson Creek watershed because several thousand lots have received preliminary approval in recent months by the Planning Commission. If all these developments are exempt from the moratorium there will be little point in passing one for Williamson Creek. The developers will have successfully gotten in under the wire. The Association will be lobbying for longer moratoriums on all three creeks and for all to apply to approved preliminaries as well.

(Continued on Page 6)