

Barton Mall to open in 1981

By Joe Riddell

A large shopping mall now under construction threatens both immediate and long-term pollution of Barton Creek and Barton Springs. When the zoning for the mall was approved, the owner pledged that the rainwater runoff would not pollute the creek. Unfortunately, the developer's plans, recently approved by the city, are inadequate to prevent such pollution.

The shopping center, known as Barton Creek Square Mall, lies north of the intersection of Loop 360 and South MoPac (now being constructed). The main channel of Barton Creek is about one-half mile away. The project includes 102 acres of pavement and 7,672 parking places. The floor space alone will total over 30 acres. Six major department stores are planned: Dillard's, Foley's, J. C. Penney, Montgomery Ward, Scarbroughs, and Sears. The developer, Melvin Simon and Associates of Indianapolis, hopes to open the mall in the fall of 1981.

Rezoned in 1975

Zoning for the mall was approved by the city in early 1975. Several persons at that time expressed concern that the rainwater running off the pavement of the mall would pollute the Creek and the Springs. In response to those concerns Sid Jagger, president of Jagger Associates, Inc., then the owner, orally promised that he would do whatever was necessary to make sure that the runoff would not degrade the water quality of the Creek. As part of the "bargaining" over the zoning, Jagger agreed to several restrictive covenants concerning how the property would be developed. However, as finally legally recorded, one covenant provides that "the owner . . . shall construct . . . such low-flow grease and/or sand filters on the Property for filtering contaminated or polluting storm water discharge as may be reasonably required by the Director of Engineering for the City of Austin." Thus, the city's engineering department was given the responsibility to make sure that the filters would be adequate to protect the Creek and the Springs.

The area where the runoff flows is within the recharge zone of the Springs. Pollutants can easily seep into the aquifer and resurface at the Springs. This contamination can happen quite quickly because of the closeness of the Springs. The polluted water which does not pass into the aquifer will flow through the Barton Creek Greenbelt and into Town Lake. Contaminated runoff can be espe-

cially harmful to Campbell's Hole. When there is no base flow in the Creek, the only water in Campbell's Hole comes from the small spring feeding it and from the local runoff. This runoff is quite polluted because it comes from a highly urbanized area. Adding the mall's pollution will only make things worse.

Last month the city's engineering department approved final plans for the mall's drainage. The mall site once was a hill. The natural hill was drained by four tributaries of Barton Creek and one of Dry Creek, to the north. The hill is being flattened and the tributaries are being filled so that the stores and parking lots will be on level ground. As most of the runoff leaves the mall, it will pass through ponds designed to filter some pollutants and to reduce peak flows. The runoff will then travel in pipes underneath either Loop 360 or MoPac before flowing down natural tributaries of Barton Creek. The distance from the mall site to the main channel of the Creek is

about 1/3 mile to 2/3 mile, depending upon the direction.

Unfortunately, the planned filter/detention ponds are not adequate to keep the Creek and the Springs from being polluted. Some parking and street areas will drain directly into a tributary of the Creek without being filtered. The ponds are designed to hold only the "first flush" of polluted runoff. If a heavy rainstorm occurs, the filter ponds will overflow, and the unfiltered runoff will head for the Creek. The engineers for the mall's drainage, Bryant-Curington Inc., did not present to the city any data on how well the filter ponds will reduce pollution in the runoff. Some pollutants of major concern — oil and grease, for example — are not generally well filtered by ponds of this design. More sophisticated (and more expensive) devices exist which could clean up the runoff better. However, the city did not use its power to make the developer use the best available methods.

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