

Mall runoff ponds await rains for pollution test

Geologists call it a typical Hill Country creek, but to Austinites, Barton Creek represents something special and all that is right with the city. With development creeping to its edges, water quality in the creek is in danger. This is the 15th in a series of articles that look at the present, past and future life along the creek, and the pollution that threatens it.

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One of the most pleasant walks in the Barton Creek valley, if one doesn't hike too far, is up a tributary called Skunk Hollow.

Flowing only in wet weather, the small creek joins the main stem of Barton Creek from the west in the Horseshoe Bend-Barton Hills area. The sometimes steep walk up the wooded draw takes the hiker through typical creekside flora and geological formations.

It dead-ends at what some Austinites consider a monument to man's insensitivity to the environment. Emerging from the woods next to MoPac Boulevard, the hiker is confronted by Barton Creek Square mall, one of the largest shopping centers in this part of the United States.

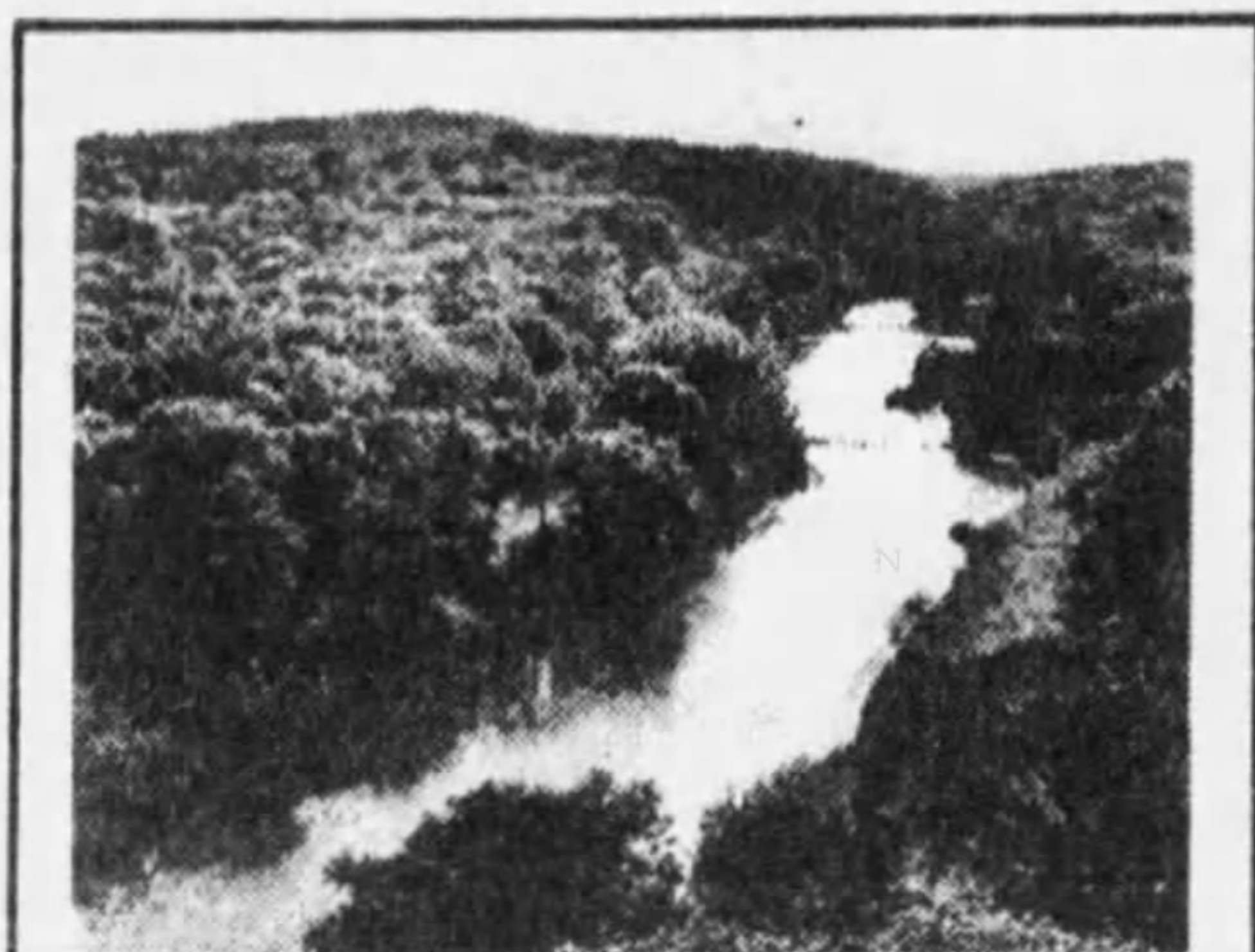
About one quarter of the mall's rooftops and parking lots drain right into Skunk Hollow. Virtually all the water that runs off it ends up in Barton Creek.

Though no one has any solid data proving that the 110-acre mall has a deleterious effect on Barton Creek's water quality, environmental groups such as the Zilker Park Posse and the Save Barton Creek Association say common sense dictates that it



Staff Photo by Tom Lankes

Runoff tanks were built for Barton Creek Square mall.



**Barton Creek:
its life and spirit**

can't be doing the creek anything but harm.

They've been watchdogs over the project since it was proposed nearly 10 years ago. And they are still at it,

urging shoppers to boycott stores in the mall and doing a slow burn over what they consider the latest anti-creek move by the mall's owner, Melvin Simon & Associates of Indianapolis.

Former mayor Jeff Friedman, a council member when the city approved the project in the mid-1970s, recalled that the project first proposed by local developer Sid Jagger wasn't nearly as expansive as what ended up being built after Jagger sold the land in 1975 to the Indiana firm.

"We had long discussions about the neighborhoods, creek and water supply, and limiting the scope of the project. The misgivings were resolved when we saw how well the neighborhood association and Jag-



ger presented their agreement," Friedman said. "But what the council approved was not what was built. (Later councils) approved changes and enlarged the scope of what was built."

As part of the agreement in which the council changed the zoning to accommodate the mall, the owners agreed to build three large ponds to catch rain runoff from the parking lot and rooftops. With a maximum capacity of 1.6 million cubic feet of water, the ponds serve a dual function by storing and slowly releasing storm runoff to ease flash flooding, and filtering runoff to remove pollutants.

The sand and gravel filters, considered state of the art when they were designed several years ago, have been the latest battleground between the mall and environmentalists. Although they have been in place since last summer, their effectiveness has never been tested. Such tests could determine if the mall is indeed spoiling Barton Creek, and if

there is substance to the brouhaha that has ensued since it was built.

Already funded by the city and U.S. Geological Survey is a 2½-year program that would measure pollutant levels in water entering the filter bed and the supposedly clean water leaving bound for Skunk Hollow and ultimately Barton Creek, less than one mile away.

Environmentalists say Simon & Associates has been dragging its feet in finishing an agreement allowing installation of the measuring devices on the detention pond along MoPac that was chosen, after painful negotiations, for the testing. Moreover, they criticize the firm for demanding that the city stipulate that there be no commitment from the mall to improve the filters if it is determined that they don't work.

Mall officials, who say the environmental groups are well-meaning but misguided, said the company has not purposely delayed the testing program. Also, they said, if the ponds don't work, the mall very well may modify them, but Simon & Associates doesn't want to make any commitments before the program even begins.

Meanwhile, as amended contracts changed hands between the mall and the geological survey this month, verbal agreement on the testing program was reached and workers last week installed the testing instruments.

All we need now are a few good rainstorms to see whether the mall is the ogre some claim it to be.

Next: Campbell's Hole back then.