

Factions debate Edwards Aquifer district proposal

More than 150 attend hearing to discuss conservation panel

By Bertha Delgado

American-Statesman Staff

More than 150 people filled a meeting room in South Austin earlier this week to hear both support and opposition to a bill that would create a Barton Springs-Edwards Aquifer Conservation District.

The South Austin Political Action Coalition, an organization whose goals are to unify and motivate the citizens of South Austin to vote, sponsored the Monday night meeting. The group heard five speakers, including the two Austin legislators who had earlier introduced rival bills on the district.

State Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos and State Rep. Terral Smith introduced their compromise bill which calls for a district financed by fees rather than property taxes.

Also speaking at the meeting were former City Council Member Roger Duncan, a supporter of the district, and Austin developer Gary Bradley, who opposes the district. Geologist Chuck Woodruff presented information about the Edwards Aquifer.

The aquifer is a water-bearing geological formation that is a source of drinking water as well as the source of Barton Springs.

The district is to cover a 155-square-mile area of Southern Travis and northern Hays counties from the Colorado River to Kyle. The district would help control pollution and overpumping of the aquifer.

The substitute bill, which Smith said he and Barrientos have "in principal, agreed on," would include user's fees.

"I would agree first of all that we need an Edward's Aquifer underground water district," Smith said. "I'm convinced that without some kind of control of pumpage out of the Edward's Aquifer, it could go dry.

"The issue, it seems to me, has always been the fairness in the funding for this particular district," he said. "They (district board) claim they need \$300,000 a year to run the district, I frankly think it can be run for half of that."

One provision of the substitute bill would allow the district to assess a fee on the City of Austin to finance up to 40 percent of the annual budget.

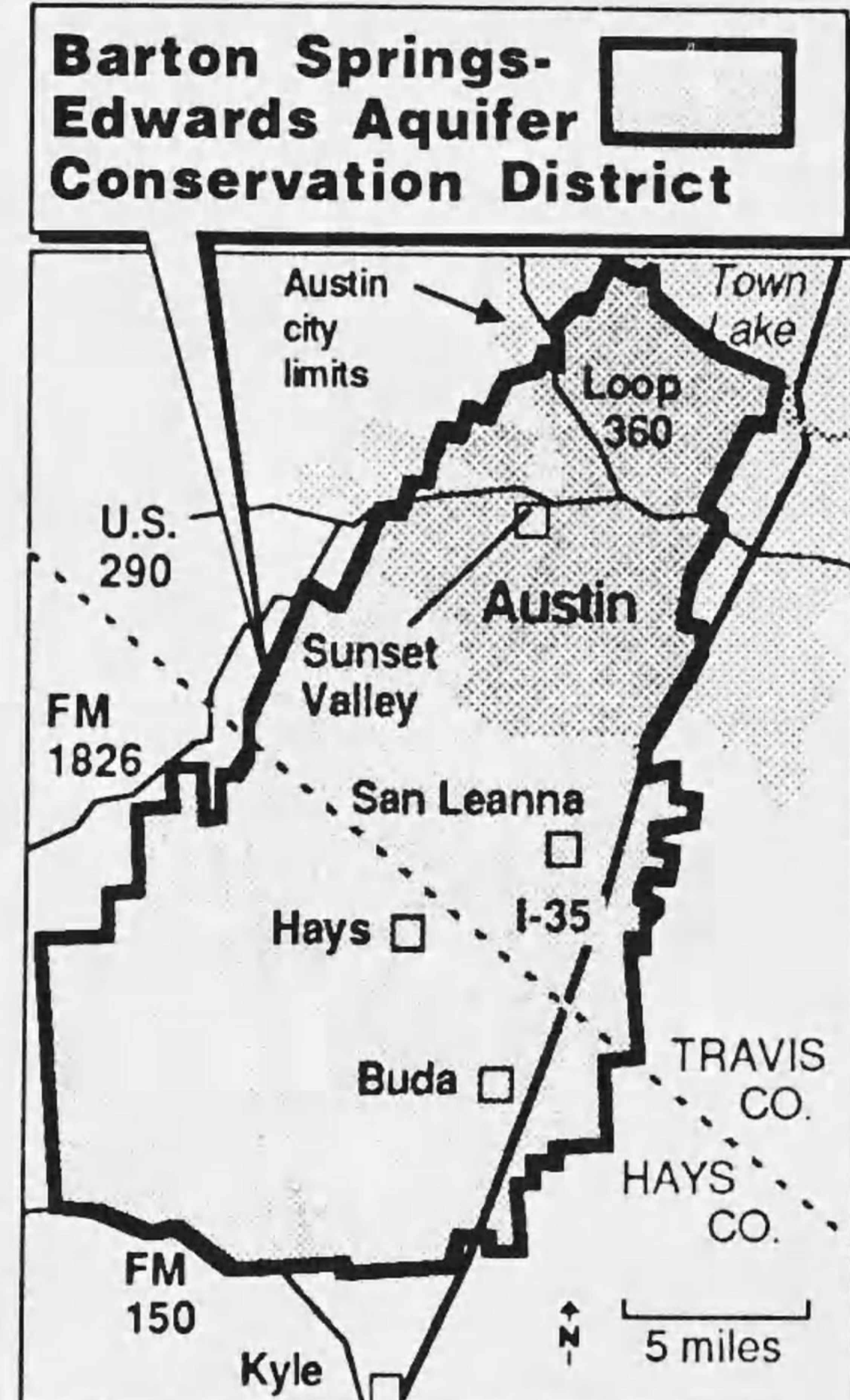
Smith said that to fund the \$300,000 district annually, it would cost the average person 27 cents per 1,000 gallons of water. The price is one-third of what Austin residents currently pay for water from the Lower Colorado River Authority, he said.

Smith said big industrial users, water supply districts or cities that pump 10,000 gallons of water or more a day would be subject to the fees, Smith said.

If user's fees are declared unconstitutional by the Texas Supreme Court, Smith said the public can decide in an election whether to fund the district with a property tax of up to three cents per \$100 valuation.

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Staff map by Mark Freistedt

Candidates file in area city elections

By Bertha Delgado

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Three incumbents have filed for re-election in April 4 City Council elections in Sunset Valley and Kyle, but only one incumbent filed for re-election in Buda last week.

Buda City Council member Kenneth Hiscoe, 52, a staff service officer for Texas Parks and Wildlife, was the only incumbent to file for re-election in the at-large race.

Jarrell Wesley Bishop, 43, a courier for an Austin law firm; Randy Hart, 33, a fire and safety technician; Roger Wheat, 42, a registered public surveyor; and Mary Capps, 39, director of the Buda Methodist Day Care Center, have filed to run for the Buda City Council.

There are five positions in Buda, with two-year staggered terms.

In Kyle, three incumbents up for re-election will run unopposed in the spring election.

Gary Hutzler, 46, director of maintenance at Hays Consolidated Independent School District; Robert McKaskle, 34, director of housing for the state Department of Housing and Urban Development; and Eusebio "Chevo" Pastrano, 37, utility foreman with Pedernales Electric Co-op, have filed as candidates for their seats.

There are five seats in Kyle with two-year staggered terms.

Sunset Valley City Council members Daniel Huebner, 33, an entrepreneur; Helen Besse, 43, an environmental engineer consultant; and Russell Harding, 52, an attorney, are seeking re-election.

Mary Black, 45, a real estate salesperson, has also filed as a candidate for the at-large-seats.

Sunset Valley has a mayor and five council members. The two-year council terms are staggered.

The filing deadline for the election was last Wednesday at 5 p.m.

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The bill that has been agreed on "would go ahead and have the people of the district have an election to confirm it," he said.

Smith said the current temporary board of directors, which includes five people, would continue until April, and then a new board would be elected to four-year staggered terms.

Barrientos told the crowd that the bottom line of the issue is that people get to vote either for or against the district.

"We are here tonight, saying

here are the issues, you are our bosses and there are more out there, you inform us as to what you would like to do," Barrientos said. "It's not an easy task, but it's the American way to do it."

Duncan said that his main concern was that the "aquifer can literally be drained bone-dry legally under the current laws."

According to Duncan, in Texas, a water conservation district is the only entity that can regulate pumpage.

Bradley, told the crowd that South Austin is consistently regulated twice as hard as North Austin.

"The reason that you have no tax tonight is because you're here, and believe me, that's the only reason," he said.

"Until you start getting treated fairly you ought to fight them every time you get a chance," Bradley said.