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A helping hand for wildlife

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With little fanfare and much optimism, a diverse group of government leaders, environmentalists and developers has taken the first steps toward an unprecedented effort to preserve the area's endangered species.

The proposal calls for producing a regional plan that could mean the eventual acquisition of thousands of acres — at a cost of millions of dollars — as sanctuary to give endangered plants and animals a fighting chance to survive.

The save-the-species plan itself is expected to cost at least \$300,000 to prepare, and it could be several years before it is completed and approved by the U.S. government.

A preliminary proposal calls for the plan to cover 10 species — two songbirds (the black-capped vireo and the golden-cheeked

warbler), five cave-dwelling creatures and three plants.

The Austin area, with its unique geological features, is believed to have the highest number of endangered species of any urban location in the country. Some are here year-round, and some migrate here for the summer, while others occasionally pass through.

Much of the suitable habitat lies west and northwest of the city, in an area earmarked for widespread development.

Proposed development include homes and businesses, road and utility improvements and portions of the proposed Outer Loop.

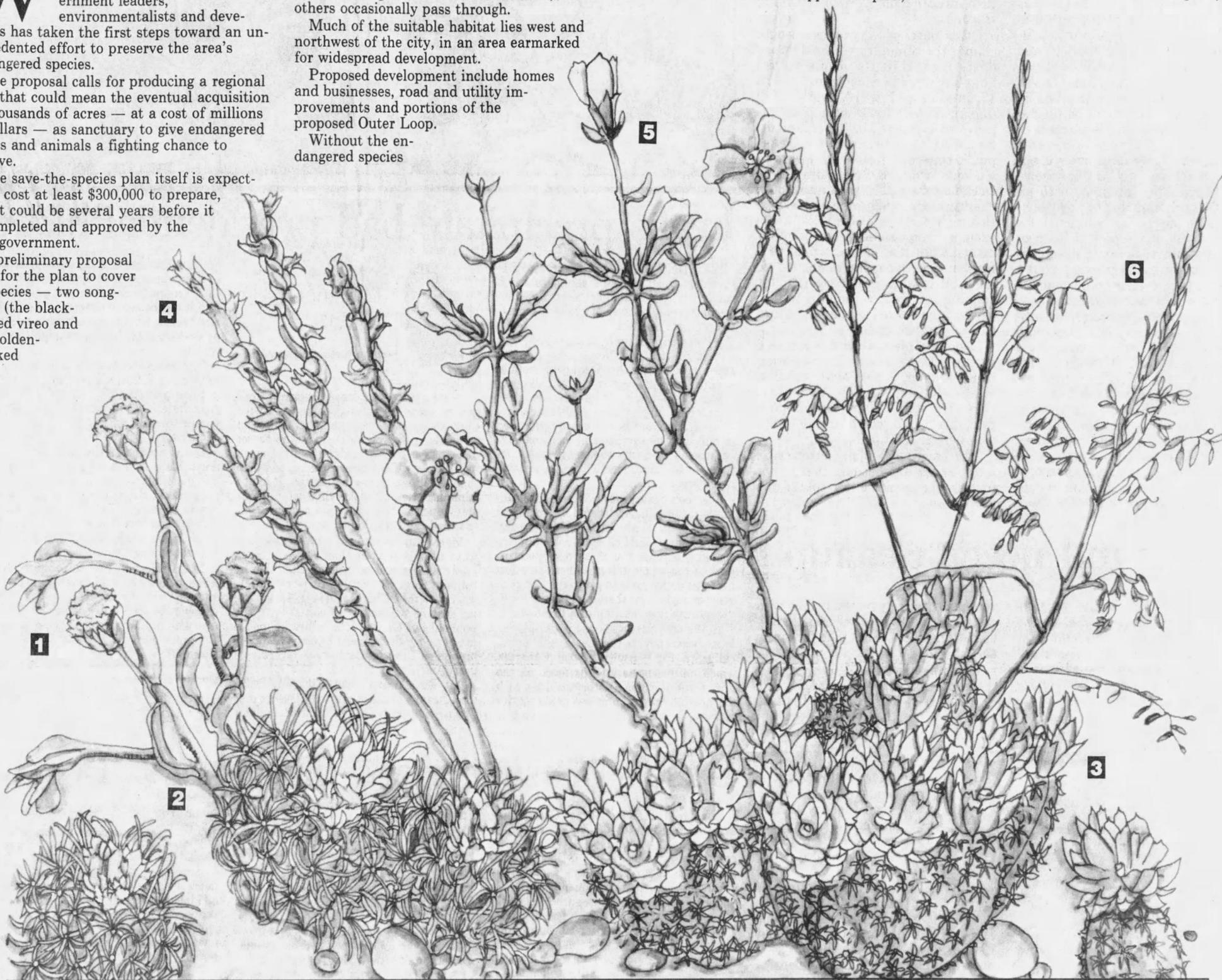
Without the endangered species

plan, many fear, this development could be halted under federal law. With the plan, there would be a trade-off: Some of the land could be developed as long as enough land remained undeveloped to ensure the survival of the endangered species.

Environmental interests support the plan,

but they also advocate passage of a city endangered species ordinance. An ordinance, believed to be the first in the nation, would ensure that endangered species are protected while the plan is being developed and if the

See Endangered, D5



Examples of endangered plants

1 Texas bitterweed

Range: Gulf prairies and marshes; Fort Bend and Harris counties, and historical collection from LaSalle County.
Scientific name: *Hymenoxys texana* (Coulter and Rose) Cockerell.

State status: Listed as endangered, Jan. 23, 1987.
Habitat: In poorly drained depressions or at the base of mima mounds in open grassland in almost barren areas with *Limnoscadium pumilum*, peppergrass, little barley and *Nostoc*.

2 Tobusch fishhook cactus

Range: Edwards Plateau; Bandera, Kerr, Kimble, Real and Uvalde counties.
Scientific name: *Ancistrocactus tobuschii* (W.T. Marshall) W.T. Marshall ex Backeberg.

State status: Listed as endangered, April 29, 1983.
Habitat: Gravel terraces along drainages, limestone ledges, ridges and rocky hill openings of live oak-juniper woodland.

3 Lloyd's hedgehog cactus

Range: Trans-Pecos; Culberson, Pecos, and Presidio counties; Dona Ana, Eddy and Otero counties in New Mexico; and Chihuahua, Mexico.
Scientific name: *Echinocereus lloydii* Britt. and Rose.

State status: Listed as endangered, Oct. 26, 1979.
Habitat: On various sites within the Chihuahuan Desert, with lechuguilla, mesquite, creosote bush, tarbush, skeleton-leaf goldeneye and various cacti.

4 Navasota ladies'-tresses

Range: Post oak savannah; Brazos, Burleson, Grimes, Jasper, Lee, Madison, Robertson and Washington counties.
Scientific name: *Spiranthes parksii* Correll.

State status: Listed as endangered, April 29, 1983.
Habitat: Open wooded margins of slightly eroded, intermittent, minor tributaries of Brazos and Navasota rivers in the Post Oak Woodlands, with post oak, blackjack oak, yaupon, American beautyberry and little bluestem.

5 Johnston's frankenia

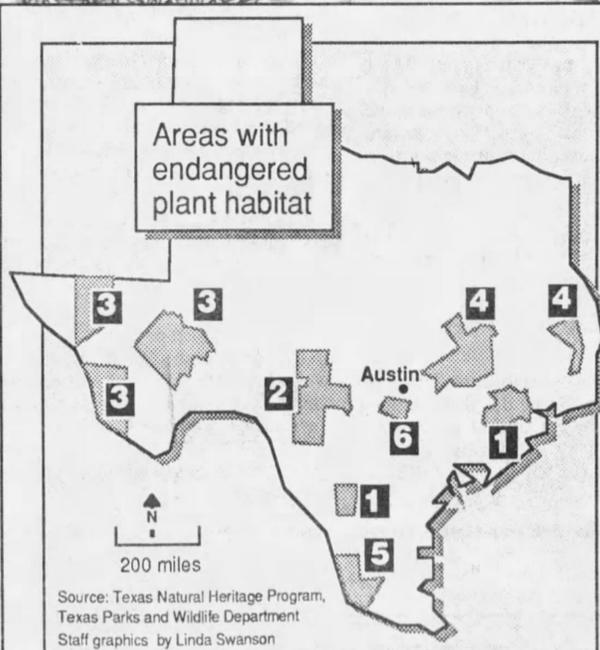
Range: South Texas Plains; Starr and Zapata counties; Coahuila-Nuevo Leon border, Mexico.
Scientific name: *Frankenia johnstonii* Correll.

State status: Listed as endangered, Jan. 23, 1987.
Habitat: Rocky hillsides and saline flats in brushlands, with saladillo, seepweed and coldenia.

6 Texas wild-rice

Range: Edwards Plateau; Hays County.
Scientific name: *Zizania texana* Hitchcock.

State status: Listed as endangered, April 29, 1983
Habitat: Clear, constant temperature, spring-fed stream, with pondweed and water-celery.



Endangered From D1

plan falls through, environmentalists say.

An ordinance would help ensure that developers stick by the regional plan and would help protect species that are not included in the plan, they say.

Developer interests back the plan as well. But they argue strongly against the ordinance, which they say will add an unnecessary layer of red tape to an already overburdened development community. Some argue that an ordinance could be a final blow to some developers trying to survive in troubled economic times. As a result, they say, it will be more difficult to tap developers for funds to develop the regional plan and to begin acquiring land.

The next few weeks will be a crucial period for the regional plan and the ordinance.

Supporters of the plan are working to get initial funding, much of it from developers, to begin biological studies by March, when the vireos will be returning to the area from winter grounds in Mexico to begin nesting.

While representatives of developers say they will be working hard to get commitments for money, early indications are that the job will not be easy.

If the studies are delayed, the plan could be delayed a year.

Meanwhile, a draft of an endangered species ordinance prepared by a citizens task force last summer has been under review by the Environmental Board, which has proposed its own version. The ordinance is expected to be considered by the Planning Commission this month and could go to the City Council for action in March.

The ordinance is expected to generate considerable controversy in part because of its controls over development in areas where endangered species exist or have existed in recent years.

While some critics argue that birds and bugs — even rare ones — should not take priority over the economic well-being of people, those pushing for protection point out that the rare species are an asset to Austin and should be treated that way.

Not only do these plants and animals attract considerable scientific interest, but they provide a biological barometer on the quality of the local environment, said Chuck Sexton, staff ecologist for the city Department of Environmental Protection.

"Austin has prided itself in its environmental awareness and sensitivity and Austin should take special pride in these species," he said.

"It is ridiculous to say that you can't have both a healthy economy

and a healthy environment," said Jane Lyons, the Austin-based regional representative of the National Audubon Society. "People who blame helpless birds for real estate losses are pointing in the wrong direction."

Without a plan agreed upon by all of the diverse groups, there is the real risk that legal battles between environmentalists and development interests will rumble on for years.

But both sides say they want to avoid that kind of fight.

"The Hill Country of Austin is a globally unique ecosystem that deserves special attention, and we think the regional plan makes enormously good sense as an alternative to fighting it out in the courts," said David Braun, director of the Texas Nature Conservancy.

Braun, whose organization has provided \$20,000 in seed money for the regional plan, is the chairman of a 15-member committee to oversee the plan's development. Other committee members include Mayor Lee Cooke, Travis County Judge Bill Aleshire, officials of several state agencies, representatives of the Sierra Club and National Audubon Society as well as area builders and developers.

The federal Endangered Species Act prohibits the "taking" of a species officially listed by the government as endangered. But the law allows the government to grant permits for development in some cases, if the application is accompanied by a habitat conservation plan. The plan can be regional or site-specific.

Proponents of the idea for Austin say it is the most sensible long-term way to preserve the diverse species, while allowing some development to occur.

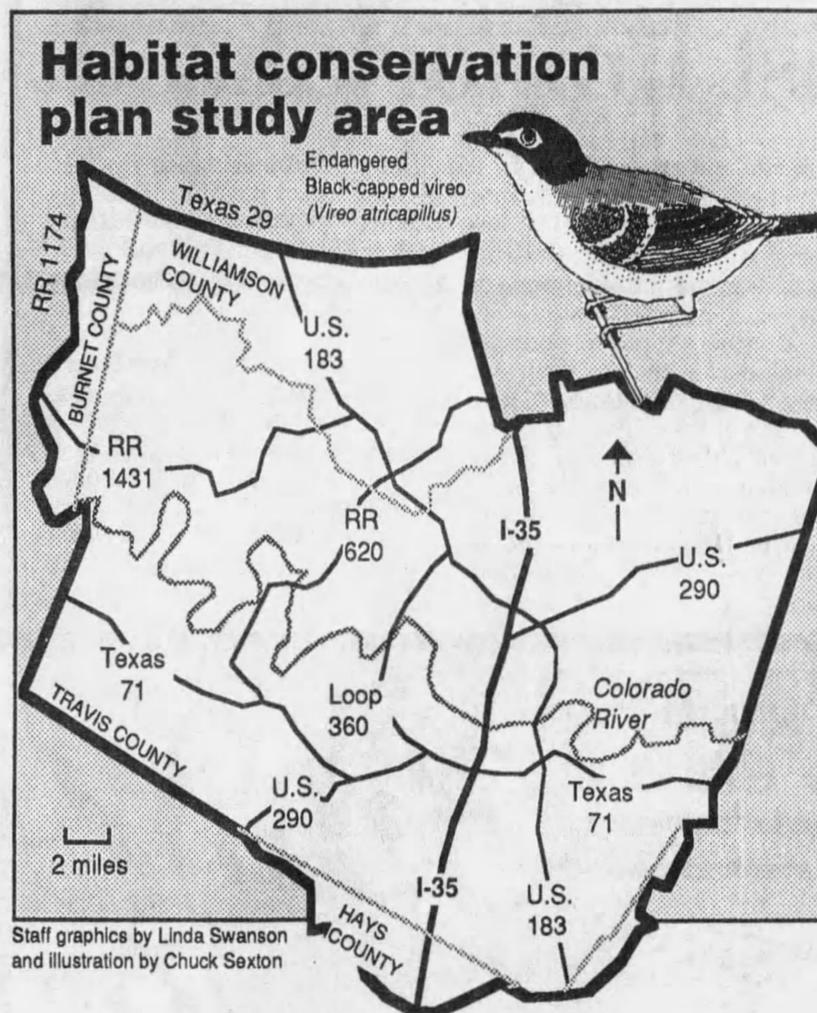
The government has approved regional plans for an endangered species in two areas in California, but a plan that covers multiple species over an entire region has never been tried before.

"We know of nowhere else on the planet that protection of multiple species has been done," said Don Bosse, director of land development for Hughes Interests, a member of the committee developing the plan.

"It is something all Austin could be proud of, if we pull it off," said Bosse, whose firm is developing the 4,500-acre Steiner Ranch, which contains prime vireo habitat.

The delicate balancing of how much of the habitat should be set aside and how much could be taken over by development remains to be worked out after technical studies are completed.

Even the most ardent supporters of the plan acknowledge there will



Staff graphics by Linda Swanson and illustration by Chuck Sexton

be some rocky times in putting it together and getting agreement on which lands to preserve and who should manage the land for the long term. And they concede that the biggest job could be in coming up with the millions of dollars likely to be required to buy the land to be preserved. But they believe the effort will be well worth it in the long run.

"Realistically, the plan is probably the only alternative for all of Travis County," said Brooks Herring, treasurer of the Texas Capitol Area Builders Association and a committee member.

Others agree.

"Either you are going to shut down all road-building, safety projects and development in that area or we are going to come up with a plan," said Travis County Commissioner Bruce Todd, whose precinct contains many of the endangered animals.

A conservation plan being developed by the county for the Comanche Trail improvement project could become the cornerstone of the regional plan, Todd said.

"The plan pulls together everyone and says you can't solve this problem piece by piece, you have to look at the big picture," said Bill Bunch, an environmental attorney who has been representing the environmental group Earth First! "While things have been going a little slower than we would like, I would say we are very comfortable with the process."

The committee has met monthly since October to work out a strate-

gy to develop the plan. It will cost an estimated \$160,000 to conduct the biological studies needed to lay the technical groundwork, committee members say.

The regional plan will be modeled generally after a plan developed to protect the endangered fringed-toed lizard in the Coachella Valley near Palm Springs, Calif., according to Braun. The result of that plan was a 13,000-acre preserve for the lizard at a cost of \$25 million, Braun said.

"We don't expect to be anywhere near that level for Austin," Braun said. "We know it is going to be in the millions, but to say more than that until the studies are completed is pure speculation."

The initial aim is to figure out the minimum population of each species needed to assure survival. Based on that information, researchers will determine how much land will be needed to support the various species and where the best suited land is located.

Consultants then can begin to calculate the cost to acquire the land and figure out where the money will come from. All of that information will have to be spelled out in the final plan before it can be approved.

"We are talking about an incredible commitment from many diverse groups, but we think it will be worth it," said Austan Librach, director of the city Department of Environmental Protection. "These species are an asset to Austin and make Austin unique and we should make the best of it."

The geological features that make the Austin area special — the prairies to the east, rocky hills to the west, and the water-bearing limestone formation called the Edwards Aquifer underneath — also attract a variety of plant and animal life, Librach said.

Eleven species of federally listed endangered species are known to occur in the Austin area, according to a report prepared by Librach's office. These include the black-capped vireo, which nests in western Travis County, and five cave-dwelling invertebrates.

The cave-dwelling creatures, which were added to the endangered list last September, include two beetles, a spider, a daddy-long-legs and a spiderlike creature called a pseudoscorpion. They are known to exist in only a few caves in western Travis County.

Five other birds — the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, whooping crane, piping plover, and interior least tern — have been known to migrate through the area. Eagles have been seen occasionally along the Colorado River east of the city, and the falcons sometimes appear at the city's Hornsby Bend wastewater treatment facility, where they prey on shorebirds or waterfowl.

Other species, including the golden-cheeked warbler, Texas horned lizard, Barton Springs salamander and several plant species also are of special concern because they are rare or threatened. The warbler, which is being considered for the federal list, nests only in Central Texas.

Another 60 species of plants and animals are considered rare in the Austin area by the city Department of Environmental Protection.

Scientists advising the committee have recommended that 10 species be considered initially for the regional conservation plan. They are the vireo, golden-cheeked warbler, the five cave invertebrates, and three plants — the bracted twist-flower, canyon mock-orange and the Texas amorpha. Another 20 species of animals and plants were listed for possible future addition.

The tentative area to be included in the plan covers all of Travis County, a chunk of southern Williamson County and small portions of Hays and Burnet counties.

The cave creatures and the black-capped vireo, which was put on the endangered list in November 1987, attracted public attention last year when members of Earth First! staged protests to stop nearby development that they said was threatening the species.

In one case Earth First! members chained themselves to

bulldozers at Steiner Ranch where a road was being cut through the development. In a second case, group members occupied four caves they said were being threatened by development at The Parke, in an area north of the intersection of RR 620 and RR 2222.

Earth First! gave official notice in April 1987 that it intended to sue various governmental agencies and developers unless corrective steps were taken to protect the endangered species in the area. Although no suit has been filed, Earth First! members say they stand ready to go to court and stage additional protests if further development threatens the endangered species.

The idea of a city ordinance to protect endangered and threatened species was first proposed by Earth First! a year ago. The group enlisted the help of Council Member Max Nofziger, who last spring introduced the resolution creating the task force to draft an ordinance.

The idea of the ordinance is to impose some development controls in areas where endangered species live. Developers setting aside lands would get credits to allow more intense development elsewhere.

But the proposal has been mired in controversy since the beginning.

Environmentalists see the ordinance going hand-in-hand with the regional plan, while developer interests see the ordinance as merely a way to stop growth.

"In our opinion the ordinance is simply not needed," said Herring of the builders association. The federal endangered species law, together with the city's own development approval process, are adequate to protect the endangered species, Herring said.

"This ordinance would impose development controls that will erode the tax base and force an increased tax rate to make up the difference," Herring said.

But environmental attorney Bunch counters that the ordinance is really a kind of insurance policy for the endangered species, particularly if the regional plan does not come off as hoped. Bunch argues that the local law is needed in part because the federal government has not enforced the endangered species law as strictly as it should have.

"Protection of endangered species is a land-use problem, and land use controls have traditionally been carried out at the local level," Bunch said. "There's not much hope for the Earth if we can't protect a tiny fraction of Travis County."