Watersheds take center stage



Staff photo by Ralph Barrera

Demonstrators stand in the rain in front of City Council Chambers during the watersheds ordinance hearing. Dozens of peo-

ple who spilled over from the packed council chamber stood on the sidewalk watching a big-screen television.

Crowd defies rain to speak piece on development

By Sylvia Martinez American-Statesman Staff

In some ways, the gathering at City Council Chambers Thursday night was like any other pep rally.

There were banners and bullhorns and cheerleaders and two opposing teams.

There was even a chill in the air and a costumed mascot.

But emotionally charged crowds weren't there to root for a team, they were there to debate the question: Can you keep Barton Creek and Barton Springs from becoming further polluted and still allow development?

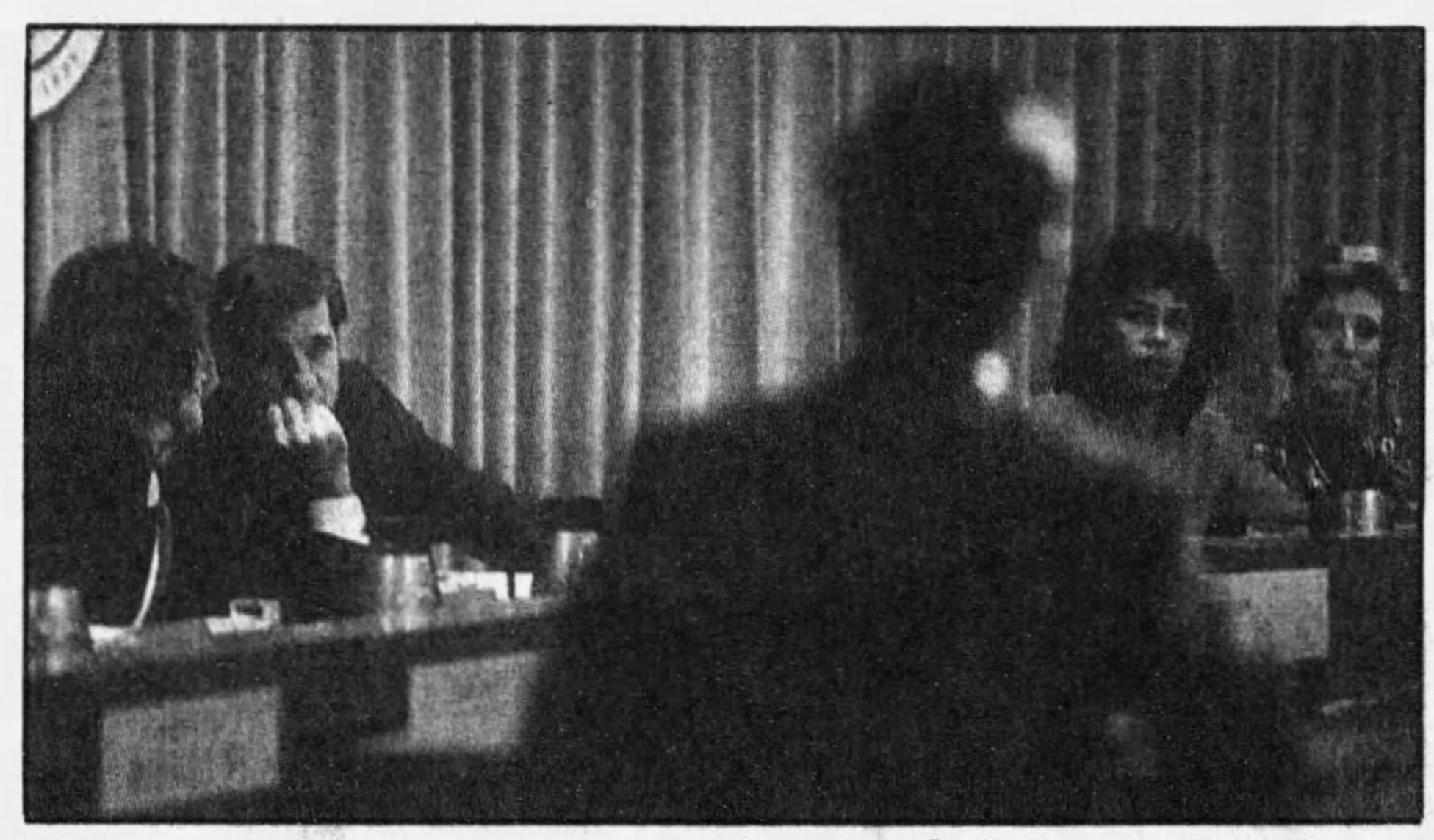
And, 476 people signed up to have their say.
On Oct. 3, the council will vote on proposed amendments to the 1986 Comprehensive Watersheds Ordinance. The proposed changes are designed to protect water quality in Barton Creek and the Barton Springs portion of the Edwards Aquifer by strictly limiting commercial and residential development.

On one side of the argument are environmentalists who say the only way to ensure the future of Barton Creek and Barton Springs is to severely limit development in the areas that contribute to the flow of the springs.

On the other side are members of the business and development community who argue that tough restrictions are not economically feasible for commercial projects. They say the restrictions would create elite residential neighborhoods in the far southwest

See Speakers, A10

Crowd reflects diversity of opinion at council hearing



Staff photos by Ralph Barrera

Austin City Council members listen to public testimony during Thursday's watersheds ordinance hearing.

By Mary Jacoby American-Statesman Staff

They signed up within minutes of each other, two fifth-generation Texans first in line at 11 a.m. to add their names to the list of speakers at Thursday's public hearing on the Comprehensive Watersheds Ordinance.

But apart from timing and heritage, Marian Michael and Russell Neal couldn't have had less in common, at least where the watersheds ordinance is concerned.

Like the hundreds of people who gathered in and around Council Chambers on Thursday evening, their opinions and backgrounds were diverse, mirroring the range of people who support or oppose the ordinance.

"I'm here today because my business and livelihood depend on growth," Neal told the council. At age 34, he is the third generation to run Neal Electric in North Austin. Thursday was the first time he'd ever spoken before the council, a job that he admitted was a little nerve-wracking.

"I think that we're letting our emotions get in the way of the facts," he said afterward. The father of two children, ages 6 and 3, he said he favored development within reasonable limitations "be-

See Speakers, A11



Robert Brandes calls the watersheds law 'a no-growth ordinance under the guise of water quality.'

Speakers defy rain

Continued from A1

quadrant of the city and Travis County by limiting construction to large-lot, single-family estates.

Both sides say they are committed to water quality, but they disagree strongly on how to achieve it.

The debate has left the two camps even further polarized.

Despite the strong feelings—and a worry by some city officials that the two segments could have clashed in a less than civil manner at Thursday night's hearing—the session was calm.

"No problems," said Assistant Police Chief Ken Williams. "It's been a very peaceful and very cooperative bunch on both sides."

To keep things that way, six police officers — some on horseback, others on motorcycles — were on hand. Ten others were on call.

As speakers addressed the council inside the West Second Street chambers, motorists honked their approval for the environmental cause outside. Council regular Eric Anderson, dressed as a Revolutionary War minuteman, banged a drum while others held signs urging motorists to honk if they wanted to save Barton Springs.

Before taking public testimony
Thursday night, City Manager Camille Barnett gave a brief history
of the Comprehensive Watersheds
Ordinance and how the council got
to Thursday's public hearing.

Amendments to the measure were proposed last year when the council asked staff to draft a zero, or non-degradation (maintain the quality of water in its current state) ordinance. Meanwhile, the council imposed a moratorium on development and adopted a strict interim ordinance, which is set to expire on Oct. 27.

Only 104 of the 467 people who signed up actually spoke. The remainder of those who registered will be allowed to speak at the Oct. 3 hearing, when the council is scheduled to cast the first of three votes on the amendments.

Mayor Bruce Todd asked other council members to see if their calendars would allow the Oct. 3 hearing to continue Oct. 4, 5 and maybe

Sixty percent of the first 100 speakers were opposed to strong restrictions on development.

Among those speaking Thursday was Circle C developer Gary Bradley. He reminded the council that it only has the authority to control or limit development in 27 percent of the area covered by the ordinance.

"Every time something happens at Barton Springs, you come back to punish that same group of property owners.... Don't continue punishing the same ones."

David Klayman, a resident of Circle C Ranch, dismissed suggestions that developers target areas other than Southwest Austin.

"We're not going somewhere else," he said. "We're already there. I can guarantee you I'm going to fight for my investment. That's my home. I promise there are going to be a lot of lawsuits as a result of the CWO."

Jim Saxton, chairman of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, said the proposed changes will affect the future of Austin's economy and the ability of businesses to survive.

he cited the

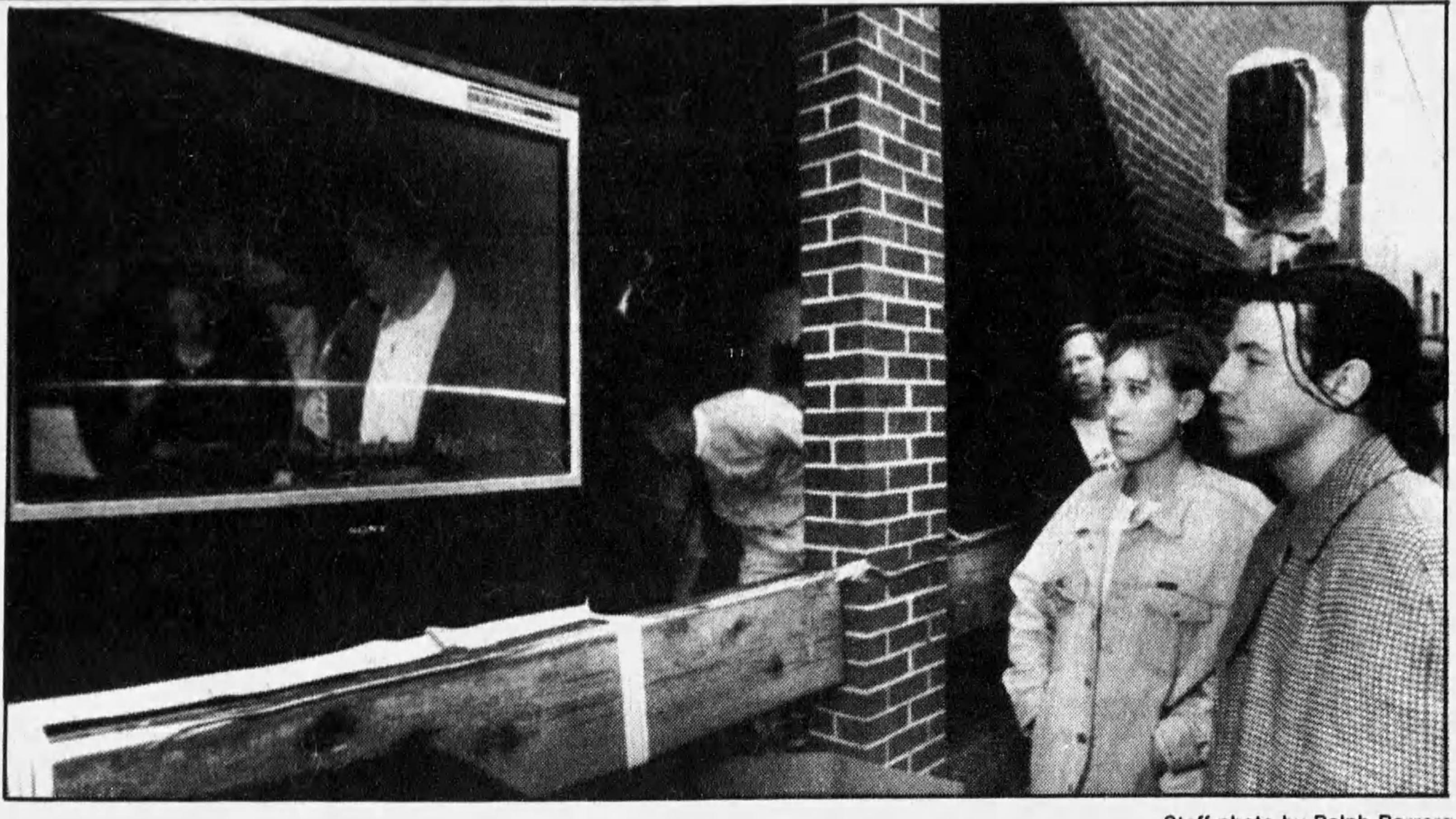
nance.

He cited the lack of technical data and the erroneous use of density measures and recommended that scientific advances be incorporated in attempts to protect the area's water quality.

"This is not a fight between developers and environmentalists," he said. "This issue is the effectiveness of the proposed measures."

Brigid Shea, spokeswoman for Save Our Springs Coalition, attacked Circle C developer Gary Bradley for using social issues to fight against the proposed ordi-

"A shameful attempt is being made to use segregation to divide our community," she said. "If developers wanted to help the poor, they would build in East Austin and not on the watershed."



Philip Gideon and Becky Robker watch the watersheds ordinance hearing on a television screen outside the

Austin City Council Chambers on Thursday. The hearing drew a crowd that exceeded the chambers' capacity.



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STEARNS & FOSTER CRYSTAL



Staff photo by Mike Boroff

With a limit of 100 speakers, places in line became a James Saxton, second from left, went to the end of the arrived earlier to save a place for him.

line at the insistence of Marian Michael, left, and Barbapoint of contention. Chamber of Commerce Chairman ra Timko, fifth from left. Thais Austin, third from left, had

Speakers reflect broad range of opinion at council hearing

Continued from A1

cause I want my kids to have a good future here."

Michael, 63, didn't attend to praise developers. She wore a Save Barton Creek pin on her black sweater. She said that lobbying for the environment is a passion, and she expresses her views regularly at council meetings.

"I have always felt very strongly

about it," she said.

She planned to stay at Thursday's hearing most of the night. "I get kind of hooked on these things," she said.

But to every point environmentalists like Michael made, there was a speaker from the other side to make an opposing point.

David Ruehlman, a trout fisherman and vice president of Lichliter, Jameson & Associates, an engineering firm in Austin that makes environmental assessments and analysis of property, said he was concerned that the technical data on the proposed amended ordinance were incorrect.

"I think that a bad decision will be made" if the council does not have correct data, he said. For emphasis, he tapped the thick Environmental Protection Agency document he'd brought with him to support his views.

He also supports economic growth. "We have 30 employees. I'm fighting for their jobs, too," he

Neal Tuttrup, 24, who dropped out of the University of Texas in the late 1980s to become an environmental activist, disagreed. He now works in UT's biology department.

"I take care of a few greenhouses and oversee" some student programs, he said of his job, but environmental activism is his life's passion. He estimated that he had spoken dozens of times before the council.

He describes himself as frugal and "out of the mainstream." When asked what interests him

besides the environment, he said, "Relations between the classes, the struggles of various groups to overcome adversity."

At first glance Robert Brandes, who wears his long, graying hair in a pony tail that falls neatly down his back, matches the stereotype of an environmentalist. A frequent writer of letters to the editor, he fits the activist mold, but on this issue he sides with pro-development forces.

"This is a no-growth ordinance under the guise of water quality," the 53-year-old former United Press International photographer

Carl Betancourt, a 34-year-old sheet metal worker who came to Austin in 1982, was in favor of a strong, anti-development ordinance. He said his views have made him an anomaly among the construction workers in Sheet Metal Workers Local 67.

He said, "They think I'm kind of liberal and radical and that stuff."