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## **The Prop. 2 Coup**

### **Not Your Same Old Song and Dance**

BY KEVIN FULLERTON, MAY 8, 1998, NEWS

The first signal that the final tally was in on the bond election Saturday night came in the form of a high-pitched whoop from Assistant City Manager Toby Futrell. A few seconds later, as election workers fanned out across the Palmer Auditorium floor bearing the news that the city's bond package had survived the election, cheers rose up from the Save Our Springs Alliance delegation. Mayor Kirk Watson climbed atop a TV station platform and beamed down on the crowd. To be sure, the era of Smart Growth had officially arrived, and in a sense, so had the mayor and his council. Having already achieved the seemingly impossible by persuading the business and environmental camps to join up together on the three bond propositions, Watson and company had tested their vision of 21st Century Austin on the waters of public confidence, and the green boat set sail. On the whole, the evening evoked an odd mix of eeriness and giddiness as old political foes engaged in congratulatory handshakes and swapped all-in-a-day's-work grins. Both sides got what they wanted out of the deal - downtown boosters got their Convention Center expansion, and enviros got their green space. Later, this feeling of good will spilled over to the S.O.S. Alliance PAC's no-frills campaign headquarters on West Fifth Street, where historically non-S.O.S. types (developer lawyer Richard Suttle, City Manager Jesus Garza, to name a couple) rubbed elbows with the likes of historically non-mainstream minglers Bill Bunch and Mike Blizzard. Emboldened by their victory, Watson, Garza, and Councilmember Daryl Slusher took to the dance floor, but there'll be no mention of their rhythmic shortcomings here.

All three propositions may have won, but this celebration was clearly in honor of the passage of Prop. 2, the most controversial of the bunch, which sought voter approval to buy thousands of acres of greenspace in the recharge and contributing zones of the Edwards Aquifer.

The public's approval of the bonds, said S.O.S. Alliance president Robin Rather, proved that conservative naysayers of the current city government occupy an isolated political fringe. "I think what we're seeing is more coalition building," she said. "The anger is dwindling." Her group conducted a frenzied campaign to stir up support for the bonds, raising \$30,000 and engaging some of the city's most prominent political consultants in the battle. "I've never worked like this, never," reflected campaigner Blizzard. "It was 9am to 2am every day."

Political consultant David Butts credited four people with hatching the Prop. 2 idea in the first place and shepherding it through to victory - Watson, Blizzard, political media man Dean Rindy, and progressive operative Mark Yznaga. "Hundreds of people gave time and energy to this project, but those were the four who are really responsible for its success," Butts said.

Opponents of the bond package, or, more accurately, of the current city council, were not conceding defeat. Southwest Travis County resident Bill Carlon, a member of the citizens' band that planted the "No Bonds" yard signs, pointed to the slim margin of victory for Prop. 2, which he and other vocal conservatives had denounced as

a clandestine, big-government land grab, and said the election marked a "watershed" in the rise of conservative voting. Bond items could generally be expected to pass 2-1, Carlon said, but Prop. 2's weaker showing indicated that "people are becoming very angry at the way the city council is doing business."

In fact, Blizzard countered, Prop. 2 was widely popular with conservative suburban voters who see initiatives like this one as a way to control growth that's spreading beyond their backyards. "The inner ring of suburbs voted with us," he said. "They can't get out of their driveways in the morning because of the traffic."

The newly annexed Circle C neighborhoods, who were expected to turn out a torrent of those malcontented voters, delivered what they promised and more, with 1,300 mostly anti-bond votes being cast in their precincts. Prop. 2 was most soundly rejected by the Circle C crowd, but the "no" votes were fired shotgun style at all the proposals. "Look at that," Futrell said disbelievably as she scanned the Circle C precinct results. "They voted against flood control in East Austin, for god's sake." She was referring to Prop. 3's non-controversial Walnut Creek improvements, which citywide passed with the widest margin.



**"There's always people out there against regulation."**

**--Bill Couch, BS/EACD Manager**

*photograph by Jana Birchum*

Watson portrayed the success of the bond package as more than just a temporary win at a game of king of the hill. "For 20 years, the citizens of Austin have been telling us they want Smart Growth," Watson said after the victory. "Now we're putting in place a mechanism for that which will last for a long time."

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## **Aquifer District Survives**

As a separate but no less contentious item on the ballot, southern voters turned down a proposal to abolish the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District. By the time half the precincts had reported, it was clear that the District had escaped its latest brush with the Laws family, the Mustang Ridge clan who filed the petition to dissolve it. And District staff member Ron Fieseler, for one, is relieved that his job will stay intact. Saturday night, Fieseler looked over the individual precinct reports, nearly all of which were running in the District's favor. "Let's see, kicked ass, kicked ass, kicked ass," he said, peering out from beneath a crisp blue BS/EACD cap. "Woohoo! Get down!"

But though the District escaped obliteration by a wide margin, and won most precincts in southern Travis and northern Hays counties, longtime board member Jack Goodman had been hoping for an even more triumphant win. "I want to beat them by 70%, not just 60%," Goodman said, referring to the District's enemies (58% of the District's constituents eventually voted in its favor). Meanwhile, in the two District board races, environmental activist Craig Smith beat John Stratford for one seat, and incumbent Don Turner, the former director of the Mystic Oaks water supply company who has historically worked at cross purposes with Goodman and other board members, held onto the other, edging Shady Hollow attorney Charles Nettles by nine votes.

District General Manager Bill Couch said he hopes that turning back this most recent attack on the District will "put the issue to rest," but added that "there's always people out there against regulation." In fact, Couch noted, there's nothing to stop Laws or anyone else from circulating a similar petition at upcoming uniform election dates in August, January, and May. One difference, however, would be that any future petition would have to collect substantially more signatures than the last one. This time around, Laws needed approval from a mere 500 people, or one-third of those who bothered to vote in the last District election. But on Saturday, over 6,000 residents cast ballots in the District board races.

Goodman said future District business will include an appeal to the Legislature to raise the District's commercial pumping fee to around 30cents per 1,000 gallons, up from the 17cents cap Laws persuaded legislators to impose in 1995. Board member electee Smith said he's hopeful that Saturday's vote "will persuade the Legislature not to mess with us and not to listen to the same arguments used in the campaign, because they've been rejected." Goodman said he'd prefer to have an allied five-member board when the District approaches legislators next session, but that he didn't fear much from Alton Laws any more. "I think [legislators] know who Alton Laws is now, and I think they're kind of pissed," Goodman said.

Overall, media consultant Rindy summed up the election results this way: "The bond proposals passed because the council had a vision of the city, and its opponents did not. This was a victory of big minds over little minds."

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