

City flooded with plans but not with cash

■ Proposals call for \$800 million worth of flood control projects

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Charles Franks cannot sell his house.

It is in the cross hairs of the Onion Creek flood plain, and Franks found some of it underwater in the floods of October 1998.

Targeted flood areas. Map, B3.

Later that year, Austinites voted to borrow \$10.8 million for drainage improvements, including \$2.4 million to buy 60 Onion Creek properties. But the money will run out after about 40 homes — well before the city gets to Franks' home.

Franks said he never maintained the rental property after the 1998 floods, expecting the city to buy it. Now it has fallen into deep

disrepair, and it was swamped with 2 feet of water during last month's floods, but city regulations forbid significant repairs to homes in flood plains. "It's quite a bit of money that we've got sitting there idle," he said. "We can't do anything with it."

More than ever, protecting Austin from a flood now depends on how much residents want to spend. Austin will need at least \$800 million to fix flooding problems during the next 40 years, according to the city staff.

The responsibility for finding the money lies with the City Council and the taxpayers. But given the upcoming spring elections and historical voter dislike for tax and fee increases, council members have generally sidestepped details about how they plan to raise so much money.

The question may come up in next year's campaigns, but officials won't make final decisions until the next budget passes in September.

City watershed protection

officials authored a master plan this year that set the \$800 million price tag on projects such as flood walls and tunnels or property buyouts. The city also raised the drainage fee for businesses, which cause more rainwater runoff and drainage problems because of their size and parking lots.

In addition, the city has recommended a series of drainage fee increases that would raise monthly rates 37 percent — from \$5.21 per

See Master, B3

Master flood control plan is in place, but money isn't

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residential utility customer to \$7.15 — over the next five years, while commercial customers will see an almost 150 percent spike over the same period.

The plan would eventually provide another \$15 million a year to control flooding.

Officials also may ask voters to approve specific projects, such as the Onion Creek buyouts, where the city borrows millions of dollars through bond sales and repays the money with tax increases.

Council members agree that the city needs to do something about flooding but have avoided specifics for now.

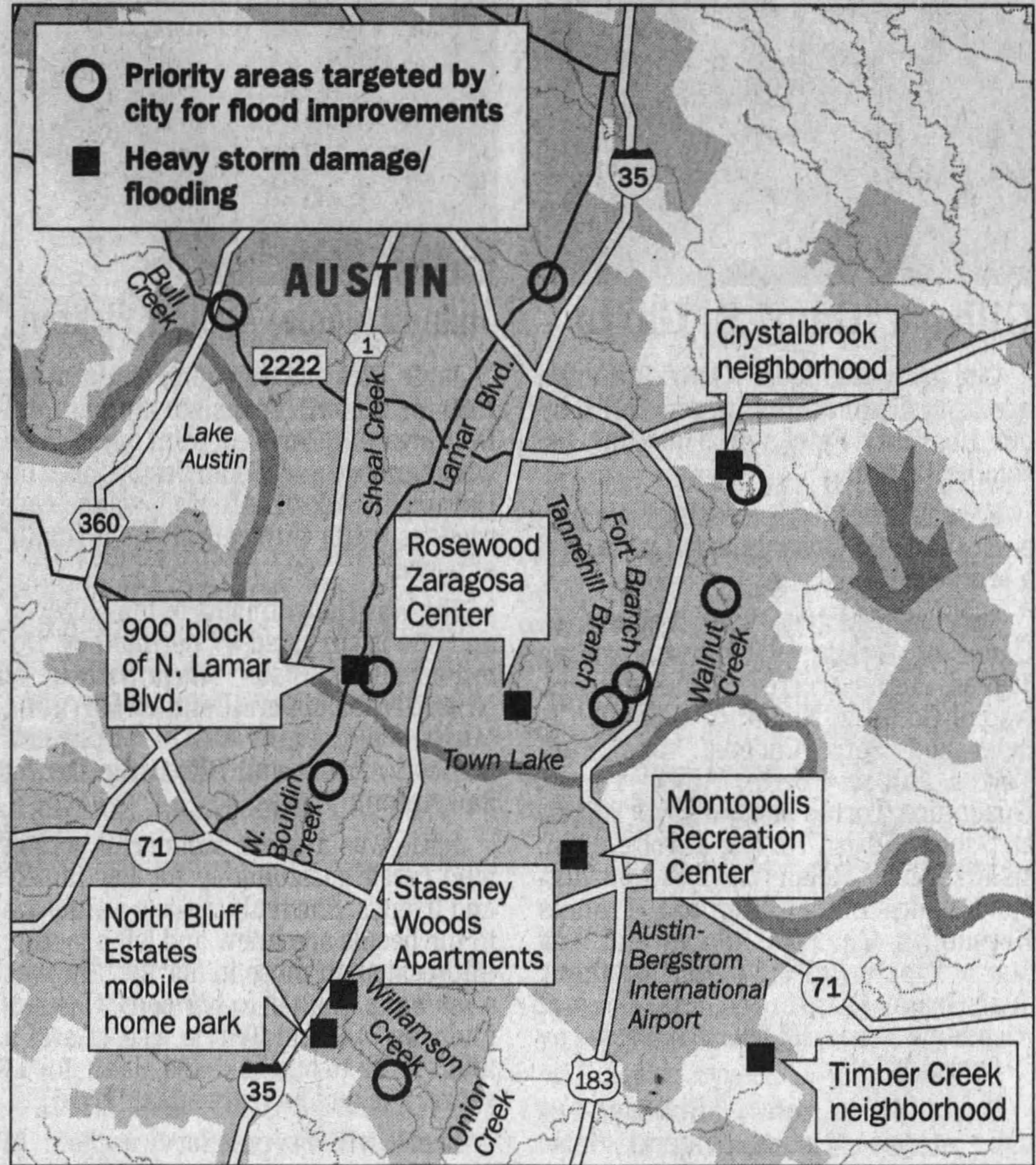
"We don't have any answers right now," said Mayor Gus Garcia. Council Member Raul Alvarez added, "It's important to try to be as aggressive as you can but not overburden the ratepayers."

The city has compounded the problem by significantly underestimating the costs of some projects.

The most dramatic instance was a planned flood tunnel on Waller Creek downtown. Voters endorsed a \$25 million tax-funded bond issue in 1998, but the project stalled last year after watershed protection officials recalculated its cost at \$46 million.

It would take another \$60 million for a similar tunnel for Shoal Creek, which overran its banks on Nov. 15 and left businesses and vehicles under several feet of water.

City officials are still reviewing their options for the downtown creeks and are talking with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers about other problems around Austin.



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Other projects are moving forward.

During the next 18 months, the city hopes to install bigger storm sewer pipes between Walnut Creek and the perpetually flooding Crystalbrook neighborhood. In about a year, the city will also start work on a levee between the neighborhood and the creek.

Both projects will cost about \$14.5 million.

"Crystalbrook is one of the highest priority areas," said Michael Heitz, director of the city's Watershed Protection and Development Review Department. "I'm trying to take care of the areas where people had water in their homes."

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