



Photo Credit: Nathan Bilow Photography

BEVERLY GRIFFITH

Parks Advocate

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I was appointed to the Austin Parks Board by then Austin Mayor, Carole Keeton Rylander in 1983. The Mayor was very committed to developing parks for all of Austin and to preserving the environment.

By the mid-1980s the Barton Creek watershed was beginning to be developed and the environmental community felt that the Springs were endangered.

In order to respond to citizen's demands to protect Barton Creek and Barton Springs. The Austin Parks Department staff entered into a competition sponsored by the National Park Service and won a two-year study of the Barton Creek Watershed. The results of the study showed that there were 1000 feet on either side of Barton Creek from the springs all the way to highway 71 that needed to be protected from development in order to preserve the quality of the springs. The study basically said that if the 2000-foot corridor was preserved it would not mean that the springs would be saved, but if the corridor was not preserved, there was no way to save the springs.

This study set the stage to act on the challenge to protect Barton Creek. During that period, Austin had been in a real estate slump and little construction was going on. There hadn't been a bond election in quite a few years so Austin had a lot of pent up demand for capital improvements for the parks. With the support of Park Director, Manuel Molinedo, I thought that the City should have a public hearing to decide what the citizens wanted to have on a bond election if the City had one. The City Manager and the Mayor thought that was a bad idea because no bond election was planned and it would raise "unrealistic citizen expectations."

I convinced our Parks Board to proceed with the hearing. The citizens wanted to be heard so much the room overflowed with people. The meeting was stopped at midnight although a lot of people still wanted to speak. The City Manager called me into her office and told her that the job description of the Chairman of the Parks Board did not include starting a bond election, to which, I replied "Yes, ma'am."

Austin Parks Board 1983-1993

Austin City Council 1997-2003

Co-Founder Austin Parks Foundation, 1992

Key Figure in Writing the Parklands Dedication Ordinance

BEVERLY GRIFFITH CONT'D

I then called another public hearing, which also resulted in an overflow crowd and lasted until 2:30 a.m. My Parks Board and I stayed in the meeting room and came up with a list of items that the citizens wanted on the bond election, if a bond election were held. One of the items was \$8 million to buy property in the Barton Creek watershed. Other items were included that would serve the citizens with better parks.

I then took the National Park Service study to the office of each city council member and could get no support. I then began a long process of taking the National Park Service study to meetings of neighborhood associations, business organizations, civic groups and anyone else who would listen to my presentation. I appeared on local television many times explaining what it would take to save the Springs.

By that time Congress had passed the Endangered Species Act, which put a halt to development in the suburbs west of Austin because much of the land had golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo birds that were endangered. Only two ways to develop the land were available. One was to set aside a big portion of the land for endangered species. The other was for the governmental body to buy and set aside a very big body of land for the birds. Naturally, the landowner wanted the City to assume the cost at taxpayer expense.

I took the National Park study and Austin Parks Board's proposals to the Planning Commission. The Commission is a very powerful board that is appointed by the City Council to make recommendations. Seven (or perhaps nine) members serve on the Board. After I made my presentation, the Planning Commission voted unanimously. Their recommendation included the Parks Board's list of improvements including \$8 million to buy land in the Barton Creek Watershed. By the time the Planning Commission's recommendation got to Council, the Council members were discussing a proposal from Mayor Bruce Todd to have a bond election with \$23 million on the ballot to buy land for the endangered species. This later became the Balcones Canyonlands.

Again, I went back to the Council with the Barton Creek proposal. This time Council member, Louise Epstein was more receptive. Bruce Todd and Louise Epstein were known not to be the best of friends. Louise decided that having a competing plan was a way to derail the Mayor's endangered species plan for the bond election. Because Mayor Todd's proposal was for \$23 million, Louise increased our plan for the Barton Creek plan from \$8 million to \$20 million. She said that this would cut the Mayor's price, but be competitive. That was very fortunate because it ended costing every bit of the \$20 million.

When the proposals went to the Council, neither side could get the 4 votes needed to put the plan on the ballot. They then decided to put both proposals on the ballot and let the citizens decide which one they wanted. The City Attorney said, "You can't do that. If you put them both on the ballot, the citizens have to vote on each separately." Eventually both went on the ballot and they both passed. That is a simplified version of the story because it took a big advertising campaign to promote the bonds.

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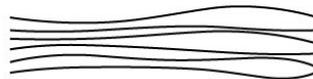
The next challenge was actually executing the purchase, buying the 2000-foot corridor. The biggest portion of the corridor was part of the Gaines Ranch. Jimmy Gaines didn't want to sell just the portion that the City wanted. He wanted to sell the whole ranch as one piece. Part of the ranch was at the intersection of Mopac freeway and the Southwest Parkway, which made it very valuable for commercial development.

Several years before all of this, Butch Smith, a Parks Department planner happened to be at a conference in California and sat beside Ted Harrison who worked for the Trust for Public Land. Butch asked, "What does the Trust for Public Land do?" Harrison explained that they negotiate with landowners to buy property in cases where a governmental entity might not be able to buy the land. The result is that environmentally sensitive land is able to be preserved. As a result of that meeting, Ted Harrison started visiting Austin and saw potential in the market. Soon he set up an office for the state of Texas in Austin.

Before the bond election was held, Ted Harrison, Beverly Griffith and Ted Siff, who was by then the state director for the TPL met with Jimmy Gaines at the Headliners Club. For 45 minutes the men spoke about football. Ted Siff, after a time left and went back to the office. Ted Harrison and Jimmy Gaines continued to sit and eventually, Jimmy Gaines, said, "Are you going to buy my land?" to which Ted Harrison replied, "yes". Ted Harrison went to the TPL and told Ted Siff that Gaines would sell his land. The TPL bought an option on the entire Gaines Ranch. After the bonds passed, TPL sold the City the portion that was needed to preserve the springs as identified in the original National Parks study. The trust then acted as a developer and sold the rest of the ranch for residential and commercial use.

No one in the world, other than the Trust for Public Land would have done that. Soon after the purchase, I was appointed to the National Advisory Board of the TPL. I first wanted to call the park, "The Great Urban Wilderness Park," but Louise Epstein felt that Barton Creek must be part of the name. The park became, "The Barton Creek Wilderness Park," but most of the residents just call it the greenbelt.

BARTON CREEK



TIME STREAM