

BUTCH SMITH

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The original Barton Creek Greenbelt was a long linear tract of land following the creek totaling 839 acres, stretching from Zilker Park into the suburbs. The trail was built in the late 1970s by Mike Brownlee who was the construction superintendent for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department. Mike said he floated gear and materials down the creek on a raft in order to construct the trail.

By the late 1980s, a rapidly developing Austin was starting to put pressure on the Barton Creek Greenbelt. This alarmed some of the environmental community. This concern all came to a head when a developer named Jim Bob Moffet planned a large 4,000-acre residential community in the upper reaches of the Barton Creek watershed. The fear that the development would negatively impact Barton Springs was stoked by an article in the Austin Chronicle by a staff writer named Daryl Slusher (who would later become a City Council Member, and subsequently became an Assistant Director of the Austin Water Utility).

Mr. Moffet had planned to present his subdivision plans and a request for Planned Unit Development (PUD) zoning before the Austin City Council at its regular Thursday night session on June 7, 1990. By late that afternoon, so many people had gathered at the City Hall location that the street in front of the building had to be closed to traffic. As the subdivision plans were presented, 800 local citizens signed up to speak, most in opposition of the plan. Because so many people wanted to speak, the Council decided to hear from all concerned citizens. The speakers came forward for hours, presenting their concerns through the evening and night. By the time the “All-Night City Council Meeting” had finished at 6:00 a.m. the next morning, the subdivision plans had been denied.

I attended this all-night meeting and sat in wonder at the unfolding of what was to be known as the “Austin Environmental Wars.” As a planner for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department, I wondered what I could do to help save Barton Creek and Barton Springs from development harm. I contacted the National Park Service for help. They offered to send a staff member from the National Park Service’s Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program. Alan Ragins from the National Park Service program came to Austin. He was treated to a canoe trip down Barton Creek from the upper reaches near Bee Cave to the Barton Creek Greenbelt. About halfway down this day-long trip, a local TV station reporter and camera crew pulled us over to the creek bank and asked for an interview, which Alan gave. As a result, the National Park Service agreed to help develop what would become the Barton Creek Greenway Plan. The Barton Creek Greenway Plan analyzed Barton Creek and its watershed from the upper reaches past Highway 71 at Bee Cave all the way to the existing Barton Creek Greenbelt in south Austin. The Plan recommended focused protection and management of approximately 8,000 acres of land within Travis County to

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conserve the environmental integrity of the greater region. City planners studied the environmental resources in the area including flood plains, aquifer recharge zones, geologic features, hydrologic features, woodland cover, endangered species habitat, rare plant clusters, slopes, cultural features and existing parkland. With the help of City Geographic Information Computer Systems, composites of these resources were aggregated in order to map the most critical areas for conservation within the study area.

One outcome of the computer analysis was the identification of an area surrounding the existing Barton Creek Greenbelt in the vicinity of Loop 360 and MoPac that has the highest concentration of significant environmental features. Since this area within Austin's urban core was highly desired for development, the conclusion was drawn that this sensitive area was the most likely to be lost to urban growth. Consequently, this area became the primary target for immediate acquisition. Subsequently, the Parks and Recreation Department, with the leadership of Parks Board President Beverly Griffith (who later became an Austin City Council Member), identified this area for immediate purchase. A \$20 million parkland acquisition bond was proposed for a public vote. The proposed bond was heavily promoted by Ms. Griffith, by Ted Siff with Common Ground Austin, and by George Cofer with the Save Barton Creek Association. The bond passed on August 8, 1992 with more than 65% of Austinites who voted "yes."

With these funds, and the assistance of Ted Siff, State Director of the Trust for Public Land, the Barton Creek Wilderness Park was acquired. This effort added an additional 1,120 acres of parkland surrounding the existing upper reaches of the Barton Creek Greenbelt. The greenbelt area protected includes the popular Twin Falls and Sculpture Falls areas as well as critical aquifer recharge features and endangered species habitat. Without this buffering of additional parkland acreage, these resources would have been negatively impacted by urban growth.

Ultimately, the National Park Service's goal of preserving 8,000 acres in the watershed was surpassed. The Nature Conservancy acquired a large planned subdivision tract, formerly called the Uplands, totaling 4,084 acres. The tract is now known as the Barton Creek Habitat Preserve. The Nature Conservancy and the City of Austin purchased conservation easements from the large Shield Ranch for an additional 6,346 acres. With the Barton Creek Greenbelt and Wilderness Park added to these preservations, the size of the protected area has grown to 12,389 acres. The combined efforts of the federal agency, local government and non-profit organizations demonstrated an amazing response to the citizens demand to "Save Barton Creek."

Post Script

Following the Barton Creek conservation success, land conservation in the central Texas area has continued to an even greater degree. In 1999, the Hill Country Conservancy was founded by George Cofer and several community leaders with support from both the environmental and development communities. In 1992, the Save our Springs Ordinance was passed by the Austin City Council to give regulatory teeth to the conservation effort. Austin citizens supported several open space bond campaigns specifically to further land and water conservation efforts. The combined efforts of city government and various non-profit organizations has resulted in the conservation of over 40,000 acres of land, primarily in the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer region. These efforts continue today.