

Austin: Where Boom Can Mean Bust

By Jeannie Ralston

Eddie Wilson was only doing his part to protect his city. The owner of Threadgill's—a well-loved restaurant in Austin, Texas, where Janis Joplin began her singing career—was on an MTV special about the capital of the Lone Star State, when the interviewer asked him what was the one thing he wanted the MTV audience to know about Austin. Wilson looked directly into the camera and announced, "We're full up. Come and visit, but don't come here to live."

But by all predictions, the wave of immigration Austin has experienced over the past several years isn't about to stop. The city ballooned 13 percent in 1992 alone, and in 1992 Travis County, where Austin is located, was the

Texas to be dry, flat, and brown, those who lay eyes on Austin's lush, green hills often call it an oasis. The Hill Country, which begins on the western edge of Austin, is approximately 25,000 square miles of live oaks, impossibly green lakes and swimming holes, limestone canyons, and fields that burst into bluebonnets every spring.

People are also moving here for sheerly practical reasons: This is where the jobs are. In 1993 Austin was the leading creator of jobs in the country among large cities. So many high-tech companies can be found in the phone book—Apple, IBM, Motorola, Dell Computers (which was born here)—that Austin has been nicknamed Silicon Hills. The University of Texas (enrollment: 50,000 students) has strong engineering and business programs and churns out skilled graduates. Many of the area's workers have moved from Silicon Valley itself, so

and traffic jams, which have contributed to a deterioration in air quality. And they see their sacred Barton Springs—to Austinites what the arch is to St. Louisans, what the Eiffel Tower is to Parisians—being shut down regularly for having elevated levels of fecal coliform bacteria.

There is no better symbol of Austin than this three-football-field-long turquoise pool of goose-bump-generating cold water bubbling up from the vast Edwards Aquifer just minutes from the downtown skyline. The land above the watersheds of the six creeks that feed the middle, or Barton Springs section, of the Edwards Aquifer, and eventually Barton Springs, is so stunning and desirable that it was only a matter of time before a growing city spilled over onto it, particularly since hardly any acreage had been turned into protected parkland. In the early '80s the Springs started being closed to swimming after every significant rainfall because of the contamination from urban runoff that the rainwater brought with it. The occasional loss of the Springs—a public swimming hole since 1918—made many start calling for measures to stem development upstream.

But it wasn't until one Jim Bob Moffett came to town in the late '80s that the fight over the Springs became as hot as a car hood in an Austin August. Moffett is CEO of New Orleans-based Freeport McMoRan, a Fortune 500 company that was listed by the Environmental Protection Agency as the United States' number-one water polluter in 1988 and 1991 in its Toxic Release Inventory. Moffett became for many the evil of development personified when he bought 4,000 acres of prime land seven miles up

Barton Creek from the Springs and tried to push through plans for a huge real estate development.

Environmentalists rallied to get a strict ordinance known as Save Our Springs, or S.O.S., on the ballot. Moffett mounted a counteroffensive through television commercials claiming that his development, Barton Creek Properties, would be a veritable poster town of environmental awareness. In August 1992 the voters approved S.O.S. by a two-to-one margin.

But Freeport claims it is exempt from the S.O.S. rules and managed to get the city planning department's approval for 13 subdivisions before the S.O.S. ordinance went into effect. The company

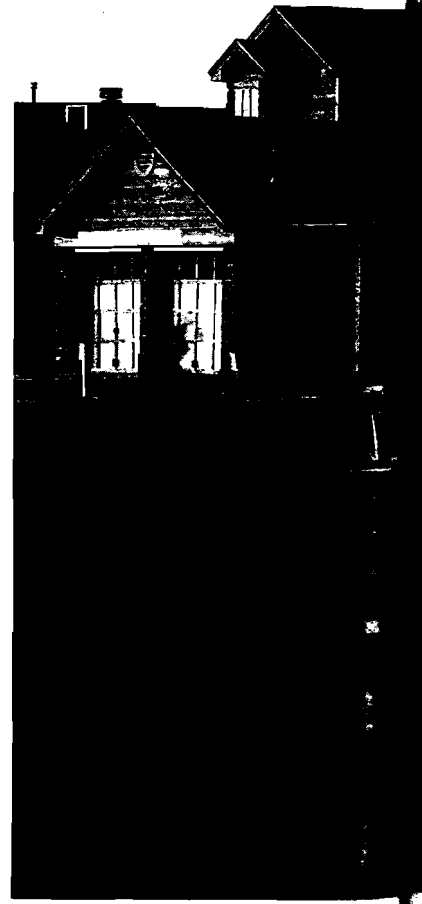
Austinites now look out onto subdivisions on Hill Country ridges that used to be pristine.

sixth-fastest-growing major county in the country. By 1995 an estimated 1 million people will live in the metropolitan area. "Our attractiveness could be our downfall," says Mayor Bruce Todd. "We have achieved success—now how do we keep it from destroying us?"

Austin's growth is in part due to a general shifting of the U.S. population to the Sunbelt. Of the 25 fastest-growing cities in 1992, only eight were outside that region (and none were in the Northeast or Midwest). Austin has what real estate agents, city boosters, and the national media refer to as quality of life. While most outsiders expect

that there is a growing community of California expatriates who have escaped high crime, high prices, and, now, high Richter-scale readings. It doesn't hurt, of course, that the state has no personal income tax.

But people who have lived here long enough see many negatives. They look out onto subdivisions of mammoth houses that have erupted like a form of suburban acne on Hill Country ridges that used to be pristine. They notice a new homogeneity to the terrain in parts of the city: strip malls, condos, and strange "Mixmaster" highway configurations. They see increases in property taxes, crime, and cars



promises it will spend \$80 million over the life of the project to build state-of-the-art water-quality controls and that only 15 percent of the entire land will have impervious cover—such as parking lots and roads (a subtle distinction from the ordinance, which calls

for impervious-cover calculations to be based only on the amount of buildable land). Environmentalists still expect that the Freeport project can be scaled back, if not stopped. (Right now, it is estimated that 13,000 to 18,000 people will ultimately live in the nearly 5,000 Freeport homes.)

There is also the matter of a two-and-a-half-inch-long

pinkish reptile known as the Barton Springs salamander. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering whether to designate the salamander, found only at Barton Springs, an endangered species. If it does, federal regulations could

provide more wallop to the S.O.S. ordinance.

But the Fish and Wildlife Service already has enough to handle with the city's other big environmental battle. A large swath of acreage west of the city, where most of the new luxury subdivisions are going up, has been designated possible habitat for two endangered birds—the golden-cheeked warbler and the

black-capped vireo—and seven types of endangered cave-dwelling invertebrates. With this designation, a developer—before building—is required to get a Fish and Wildlife permit assuring that his activity will not harm any

endangered species. Without the permit, the developer cannot build at all. With the permit, he may be able to build after he sets aside a certain percentage of acreage—on or adjacent to the property—for the species.

To reduce developer expenses, a regional plan was devised to turn 34,000 acres into a preserve, a contiguous parcel of land for the species

to live and breed on. While city voters approved \$22 million in bonds needed to fund the land purchase, county voters nixed their share (\$49 million) last November. The fate of the project is now in question. In the meantime many

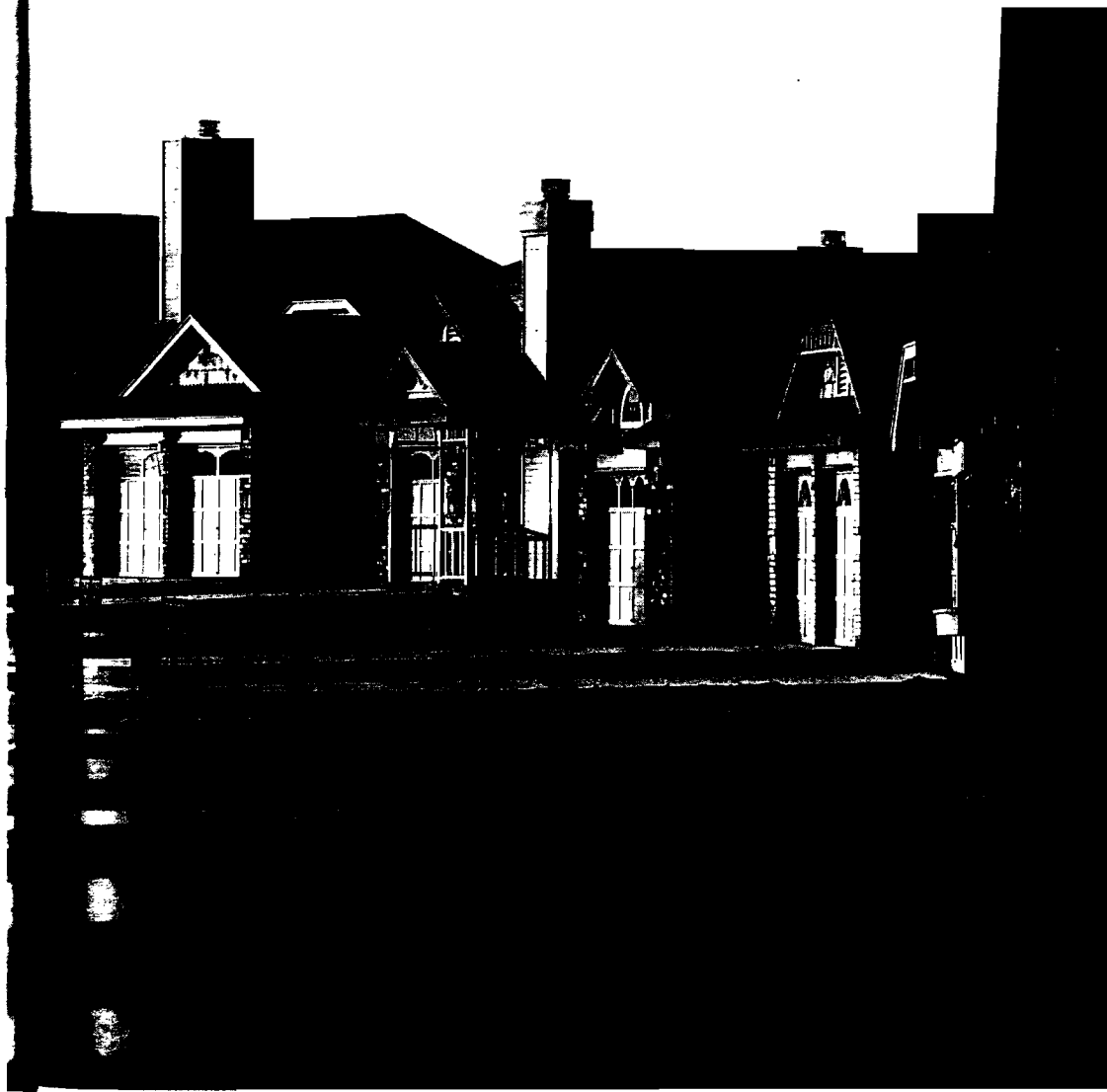
developers who have been sitting on prime Austin Hill Country land during the city's stupendous real estate boom are as anxious as rodeo bulls to get out of the gate.

Many Austinites are calling on the city to relieve the housing crunch by extending infrastructure and encouraging development north, south, and east of the city, rather than west. (One real estate agent even specializes in placing people in homes that are "geographically correct.") The Hill Country Foundation, a nonprofit education and research organization, estimates that over the past 15 years more than \$300 million has been spent by the city and other government entities on infrastructure (roads, schools, sewers) in the watershed areas that feed Barton Springs, as opposed to \$15 million to buy land for various preserves.

"When you look at how much money is spent helping to ruin the environment versus protecting it, it makes you wonder if democracy is alive and well in Austin, Texas," says Helen Ballew, executive director of the Hill Country Foundation. "I put it to you that it's not, when citizens in one election after another are saying they don't want the city to grow that way. We're in the middle of this boom now, and there's a feeling among the public that we're not sure we're going to come out of it whole."

Travis County, Texas, is one of the country's fastest-growing counties.

AUSTIN: CITY AT THE LIMIT



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