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Proposed private project to improve Mount Bonnell park on hold

By Elizabeth Pagano

An Austin nonprofit organization is leading an effort to raise \$150,000 in private funds to make improvements to **Mount Bonnell** at **Covert Park**. However, the City of Austin's **Parks and Recreation Department** is reluctant to sign off on the agreement after commissioners with the city's **Historic Landmark Commission** balked at the idea.

Indeed, hesitation by some commissioners has prompted Parks department officials to withdraw their application to make the improvements, including replacing a weathered monument that commemorates the Covert family's 1938 gift of 5.3 acres to **Travis County**.

Assistant Director of the Parks and Recreation Department, Kimberly McNeely told *In Fact Daily* that her department hoped to figure out a better plan with the West Point Society of Central Texas, the group that wants to make the improvements, based on the feedback from the city's Historic Landmark Commission's **Certificate of Appropriateness Committee**.

Appropriateness Committee members were divided in their opinions, with commissioners **Terri Myers** and **Meghan Kleon** saying they could see several sides to the issue.

The limestone marker has badly deteriorated over the years. The Covert family has pledged the initial funds for replacement of the marker with an exact replica constructed out of granite.

The family hopes the new marker will last for hundreds of years. They further note that while the original marker could be repaired, it would be unlikely to survive for any length of time when exposed to the elements.

The **West Point Society of Central Texas** is spearheading the overall project, which would replace the 1938 marker in the first phase and do landscaping, and build a dais and seating in the second. The organization has adopted the park as part of the parks department's "Adopt-a-Park" program. With an initial pledge of about \$20,000 from the Covert family, in-kind contributions and a grant from the **Austin Parks Foundation**, the approximately \$150,000 project would not use any city funds.

Myers said that she thought that what was landmarked on the site was something "less tangible" than the physical features of the park, which from its summit of more than 700 feet offers a commanding view of western Austin overlooking the Colorado River. "It's something that is the view, or the experience of climbing up there and seeing that magnificent view," Myers said.

Limbacher wasn't so sure. "I'm just offering you my opinion, which I believe you asked for when you came," she said. "That was the 19th century experience, that was the experience in the '30s, when this park was done, and somehow we've gone pretty far afield from what I think is our period of significance here."

She called the original marker "a central part of the historic experience," as well as a landmarked monument.

Fred Bothwell, who is the Mount Bonnell project manager for the West Point Society, summed the situation. "I commend your fidelity to the muse of history," he told Limbacher, "but I think it's sad, and I think the Coverts are extremely sad."

Bothwell said that the marker had effectively been "demolished by neglect."

"History didn't stop in 1938," said Bothwell. "This is the same family, with people who were living when the original marker was put there who would like to sustain their gift. And it may be one of the most significant gifts ever given to the people of Travis County and the City of Austin. ... A piece of property that is worth \$5 to \$10 million, and yet the public sector could not adequately maintain the sole feature of it that existed in 1938."

Bothwell suggested committee members follow the example of the Rosetta Stone, preserving the original against the elements in a protected area or museum, and making a replica that could sit on the original spot. Still, Limbacher wouldn't budge. "In my view, it's inappropriate to contemplate moving this monument," Limbacher said.

Separately, the local West Point Society has received publicity for its request that the **Texas Historical Commission** change a 1969 marker on the site that states Mount Bonnell was named for **George Bonnell**, author, publisher and militiaman who moved to Austin in late 1839, and was killed in 1842. According to an organization web page, the discovery of additional information indicates that the mountain was most likely named in 1839 by **Texas Secretary of War Albert Sidney Johnston** to honor his colleague and fellow West Point graduate **Joseph Bonnell**.

Commissioners and the city's Preservation Office have remained tight-lipped about the project to fund improvements to Mount Bonnell since it was heard. "I don't really feel comfortable discussing it because the application does not exist," said **Preservation Officer Steve Sadowsky**, who repeated "the application has been withdrawn" as an answer to all other questions asked by *In Fact Daily*.

Limbacher also declined to comment on the case.

The Coverts have no interest in paying for the restoration of the original limestone. Without their initial funds, the rest of the project will not happen.

Bothwell told *In Fact Daily* that the project is currently at a "hard stop."

West Point Society Member **Stan Bacon** said that, after being shot down by the Certificate of

Appropriateness committee, his group asked the Parks department to bring the case before the whole Commission, with the understanding that if it was rejected, there was a process of appeal to City Council. This did not happen. Instead, PARD withdrew the case in advance of the meeting.

Former Mayor **Bruce Todd** told *In Fact Daily* that he thought the project was an incredible gift to the city, and held out hope that the City of Austin would ultimately be able to come to a favorable decision.

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