

MOUNT BONNELL NEEDS HELP

Mount Bonnell, located on a 5+ acre tract of land above Lake Austin and one of Austin's most beloved landmarks, is in dire straits. In the recent past the natural beauty of the park has become overbuilt and overgrown, and visitor amenities have been allowed to deteriorate.

HISTORY

Privately owned until 1939, the land and the magnificent high ground it embraces were given by the Covert family of Austin to the people of Travis County for use as a public recreation site: Covert Park. The gift was commemorated with a simple limestone tablet on the crest of the hill, installed by Stasswender Memorials of Austin.

Ownership of the park was transferred to the City of Austin in 1978. In the 1980s planters, walls, steps, and a pergola supported by massive limestone pillars were erected on the crest of the hill. In subsequent years, unrestrained growth of vegetation around the crest impaired the historic views.

In 1990 Mount Bonnell was granted Historic Zoning and designated as a Historic Landmark based on the following recommendation: "The historic importance of this site is apparent. Mt. Bonnell is the highest point in the Balcones Escarpment; a lookout point and pathways were used by Indians; a prominent tourist destination"

By 2008, the limestone tablet erected 70 years before to commemorate the gift from the Covert family had deteriorated to the point of near demolition. It continues to erode. Only about 1/3 of the original tablet remains.

OPERATION RESCUE

In 2010, alarmed by the rapidly increasing degradation of the park, a group of concerned citizens allied with the Austin Parks Foundation and adopted Mount Bonnell at Covert Park. Their purpose: to restore the magnificent views for which the park was noted and reverse the gradual destruction of its amenities.

Led by the West Point Society of Central Texas, the group began joint planning for improvements with PARD, while initiating ongoing clean up days at the park and providing management for the Mount Bonnell checkpoint of the annual Oyster Race.

RESCUE: 2010

In 2010 the group was able to raise several thousand dollars, including a grant from the Austin Parks Foundation to pay an arborist to restore many of the views that were obscured by overgrown vegetation, coordinated with PARD and the Balcones Canyonland Preserve. The West Point Society also began discussions with representatives of area neighborhood associations, the Covert family, Stasswender Memorials (installers of the original limestone tablet), and the award winning design firm of O'Connell Robertson to develop a proposal for rehabilitation of the deteriorating site.

RESCUE: 2011

In early 2011, the West Point Society submitted Community Initiated Improvement Project Applications to PARD proposing replacement of the continuously deteriorating, broken Stasswender tablet with a permanent Texas granite replica (closely matching the original, fragile limestone artifact in coloration, size, shape and inscription) and repaving the area around the tablet to create a more usable space. The proposal, with an

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estimated cost of over \$70,000, was supported by Neighborhood Associations, and funded by private donors and grants from the Austin Parks Foundation and Austin City Limits.

In October 2011, 10 months after submission of their proposal, supporters were informed that any improvements required approval of the Historic Landmark Commission, and that such approval was unlikely! In November supporters requested an informal review of the proposal by the Certificate of Appropriateness Committee of the HLC. The Committee chair concluded that in her opinion the entire proposal was inappropriate.

REVISION: 2012

Supporters of the proposal worked with PARD staff to revise the proposal to meet appropriate standards. The remains of the original tablet were to be removed, restored, and displayed in a protected space provided by the city. The landscape design was simplified, view obstructing walls and proposed free-standing benches were eliminated, handrails added, and new seating added to the pergola. The finished proposal, now with a cost of over \$120,000 was formally submitted to the Appropriateness Committee by PARD in mid 2012. It was again deemed inappropriate.

ACTION: 2013

With the support of former Mayor Bruce Todd, the West Point Society petitioned the City Council to consider overruling the objections of the Landmark Commission and allow the proposed privately funded rehabilitation and improvements to Covert Park. Public input will undoubtedly be considered by the Council in reaching a decision about the proposal after review by the Land, Facilities and Programs Committee and the Parks Board later this month.

