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Mount Bonnell monument saga lands at Parks and Rec Board

By Elizabeth Pagano

The fight to replace a marker on the top of **Mount Bonnell** moved to a committee of the **Parks and Recreation Board** this past Monday, where it encountered more opposition from the city.

In a vote of 2-0, the **Land, Facilities, and Programs Committee** did not recommend the changes to the larger board. Member **Susana Almanza** was absent.

A plan to make ground improvements on Mount Bonnell stalled out last fall after the **Historic Landmark Commission Certificate of Appropriateness Committee** expressed its disapproval. The city's **Parks and Recreation Department** subsequently withdrew its application for the improvements. Though the plan is being spearheaded by **The West Point Society of Central Texas**, the land is owned by the Parks Department, and requires its support.

The project 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.

However, the group says that the seed money is contingent upon replacement of the historic limestone marker, which commemorates the Covert family gift, with a more durable granite marker that the family hopes will last well into the future. The current marker is badly broken, and pieces of the marker have sat in Parks and Recreation storage for years. Their insistence on replacing the marker has become a sticking point.

Committee Member **Lynn Osgood** made the motion to recommend against the improvements, saying that they would put the Parks and Recreation Department in a bad position. She stressed the need for the department to adhere to the **Secretary of the Interior** standards for preservation, as interpreted by the city.

"Cities are wonderfully complex, and we have wonderfully complex systems in order to deal with that," said Osgood. "We are very blessed in our city to have incredible members of community groups that work very hard, and give hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of thousands of hours to improve our parks. But as we grow as a

city, we're seeing more and more groups coming forward with their plans. And as wonderful as they are, and as noble as they are, they have to meet the overall process.”

Fred Bothwell, who is a member of the West Point Society of Central Texas, told the committee that the first step of their plan would be to remove the damaged marker, repair it, and store it in a protected environment, either on the current site, or somewhere else. He explained that they were concerned that new limestone was likely to disintegrate again in another 70 years.

“It's possible to call this thing a monument. It's also possible to call this thing a tablet,” said Bothwell, who noted that the Rosetta Stone, and Stone of Stones, and Elgin Marbles were all similarly preserved in protected environments away from their original locations.

“The best way to preserve stone objects outdoors is to move them indoors,” said Bothwell. “This radically limits the agents of deterioration.”

“This is one of the few propositions that I'm aware of where a private organization has come forward, prepared to spend and invest \$126,000 at no cost to the taxpayers. We are trying to give the people of Austin a gift, and obstacles have been created in our path,” said Bothwell.

Blake Tollett, with the **West Austin Neighborhood Group** told the committee that while WANG had previously supported the project, they were now conditioning that support on the ability of the West Point Society of Central Texas to work with the city.

“One of our concerns is the process of the thing. You work the process. It's very disturbing to us... We understand this is one way to approach things, but it's not how we would do it. I would say,” said Tollett. “They're a wonderful organization, and what they've done so far is wonderful, but they seem to have hit this stumbling point.”

Tollett read a letter from WANG that expressed concern that the “future stewardship of the West Point Society of the Central Texas of Mount Bonnell seems to be in doubt,” but members of the group that were present refuted the idea that they would be giving up stewardship any time soon.

The case heads to the full Parks and Recreation Board next Tuesday. If it is approved, it moves on to the City Council, but if denied, a new plan will have to be devised.