

A Funny Thing Happened ...

BY WELLS DUNBAR

Politicians like to joke about Austin's terminal case of democracy – how almost every piece of municipal business has a dozen sides, how every proposed change is task-forced and commissioned within an inch of its life, how the term “stakeholder” has to be, hands down, more popular per capita in Austin than D.C. or the U.N.

They're wrong, most of the time. (I don't remember anyone asking me about the bulldozers lining the hike and bike trail.) But not in one instance – the May City Council elections.

By BTP's exceedingly rough count – tallied from Place 3 candidate Randi Shade's website, who's kept a comprehensive list – there have been some 22 forums so far, with neighborhood associations, endorsing bodies, Democratic clubs, and yes, various and sundry “stakeholder” groups. At least eight more loom on the horizon. Excepting the *Chronicle's* own endorsement meetings, I've made it to three – assemblies sponsored by the North by Northwest Democrats, the Austin Neighborhoods Council, and Responsible Growth for Northcross – which have run the gamut from Keystone Kops disorganization to second-hand precision. I plan on attending a few more before election day, including the one today, April 17, in City Hall chambers, sponsored by the League of Women Voters and the Ethics Review Commission. (Now there's a goo-goo match-up in muckraking heaven.)

Regardless, since the start of March, we've been inundated with dozens of meetings, the whos, whats, whens, and wheres of local government, People's Republic style. The only question is: Why?

Hoteliers and Libertarians

The answer, of course, is so voters can make an informed choice this election. But no candidate or adviser BTP has spoken with remembers a similar torrent of meetings last round of elections. By now, candidates have had ample chances to inveigh on all things neighborhood-related, as well as on the finer points of public safety and environmental measures – pretty much the holy trinity of River City politics. But they've also expounded (or will shortly) on the arts, architecture, bicycling, the zero-waste plan, hotelier concerns, and the Libertarian Party of Texas.

This exercise in narrowcasting has resulted in some markedly meta-moments, like former Austin Neighborhoods Council President Laura Morrison getting grilled by the organization she once led or Responsible Growth for Northcross inviting intrinsic member Jason Meeker to their candidate forum. (Hmm, wonder who'll pick up the nod?) To their credit, neither organization pulled any punches or let their former functionaries off the hook, although Lee Leffingwell was afforded a rather

continued on p.18



SANDY CARSON

CodePink members and others gathered on tax day, April 15, to remind us of the \$3 billion-a-week war we're funding while the economy goes in the tank. "We should recall that what's taxing the American economy the most is the ongoing occupation of Iraq," said U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett. "Real tax relief begins when we begin a safe, orderly phased withdrawal from Iraq."



QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"The president's plan to have America stand by while greenhouse gases reach dangerous levels and threaten America and the world is worse than doing nothing – it is the height of irresponsibility."

– U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., responding to President Bush's global warming policy rolled out this week

HEADLINES

- ▶ **Kristen Vassallo**, chief of staff under city managers Toby Futrell and Marc Ott, has announced plans to step down in early May. The loyal member of the Tobyocracy says she needs more face time with her family.
- ▶ Neighborhoods continued to fight **eastern Travis Co. landfill** expansion this week.
- ▶ The **Save Our Springs Alliance** vowed not to liquidate, despite a judge's rejection of its bankruptcy repayment plan.
- ▶ **City Council candidates** are collecting hundreds – and hundreds and hundreds – of dollars in the race to election day; see p.22.

NAKED CITY

- ▶ Yet another bit of Austin's soul is disappearing in the name of progress. **Texas Showdown Saloon**, the venerable watering hole near UT campus – and home of beloved Happy Minutes, the daily 15-minute interlude when 10-ounce domestic beers cost only 40 cents – will close down, probably sometime in late April or May. "We've lost our lease; that's a fact," says Eddie Mack, general manager of the chain's Austin and San Marcos locations (Showdown also has bars in Arlington and Fort Worth). "They did not renew it. ... They're not willing to give us another lease. They've taken another offer on something; I'm not sure

what." We're not sure what, either – Mack didn't want to give us contact information for the property's owners, saying, "I really don't know how that's relevant to anything." Through county property records, we learned that the site is owned by Julia J. Sawyer, who owns other Austin properties (including famed breakfast-taco joint Tamale House). We know that Sawyer has been in ill health in recent years and that her family has been managing her properties, but we were unsuccessful in contacting the family. "It's a sorrowful occasion," said Mack, manager since 1992. "I've put a lot of blood and guts into this place. It's been here since 1981. We have lots of faithful clientele that really hate to see us go, and I hate to see it go, but there's nothing I can do." Prior to the Showdown, the property previously housed the legendary punk venue Raul's. Mack says Texas Showdown will try to relocate elsewhere in Austin. – *Lee Nichols*

- ▶ The grand opening of **Southwest Key's** new Govalle/Johnston Terrace headquarters is scheduled for Saturday. The \$8 million facility, located only a block from Johnston High School at 6002 Jain Ln., will be home to Southwest Key's corporate offices, as well as community-based facilities for a Boys & Girls Club, community cafe, and Advanced Micro Devices Community Technology Center. Those facilities, plus a 150-seat amphitheatre, will bring new space to Southeast Austin for educational, arts, and workforce development programs. The goal, said Southwest Key founder

continued on p.19