

Akers: An urban oasis awaits you

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The opening of Town Lake Park is a special moment, an occasion not just to enjoy its interactive fountain, observation hill, pond, meadow, paths and the beginnings of its children's garden, but also to appreciate the park within its larger setting, its environmental significance and its testimony to Austin's grass-roots democracy.

Since Lady Bird Johnson's and Roberta Crenshaw's beautification efforts of the 1960s, the public lands along Lady Bird Lake have been transformed into a green necklace draped across the central city. Until now, that necklace has never had a centerpiece, nor has Austin had what can be called a central park, a focused outdoor space directly at its heart (though Barton Springs may be rightly called its soul). Town Lake Park is that new centerpiece, a green cultural park that is integrated with the new Palmer Events Center, Long Center for the Performing Arts, Auditorium Shores and the hike-and-bike trail.

To limit the sprawl spawned by Austin's energetic growth, reduce fuel consumption and preserve critical natural features at the city's edges, we must make the central city more dense, developing homes without large private yards. But to remain healthy, people still need a place nearby to get outdoors and play, which means we must create large, durable, public spaces. Without places like Town Lake Park and the lakefront parklands, our dense inner city could become a concrete ghetto that would only invite more sprawl.

Town Lake Park's history reflects our city's sensibilities and political character.

In the 1980s, a proposal to surrender the 54 acres next to Palmer Auditorium to private development and a convention center had City Council support. But a group of scrappy, poorly connected and poorly funded South Austin activists formed the Town Lake Park Alliance and said no. They fought the city, its moneyed power structure and the Chamber of Commerce, gathered 19,000 petition signatures, motivated 29,000 voters, helped elect our first "green" City Council, and launched the Town Lake initiative that resulted in the dedication of over 400 acres of parkland from Longhorn Dam to Tom Miller Dam. The group developed a grass-roots vision of a great park on the 54 acres and instigated a comprehensive plan for the entire park corridor and a Waterfront Overlay Ordinance to soften private development at its edges.

Then, in 1998, the University of Texas' eviction notice to the city's major performance arts groups led the groups to seek Palmer Auditorium as a new home, triggering a parade of schemes for accommodating the displaced. Proposals for an athletic arena, a poorly sited events center and garage, and renewed calls for private development threatened to bury the dream of a central park.

But a new generation of Austinites shared their predecessors' dream and said no, that the redevelopment must enable the park, not bury it. Out of the chaos, activists with seemingly conflicting goals compromised and forged an extraordinary development pact that allowed the coordinated construction of a performing arts center, a public events facility and Town Lake Park.

Though the city's Public Works and Parks departments have done excellent work, the park is still a work in progress. The city funded the recent Phase Two construction, but the extraordinary outdoor musical instruments, sculptures, children's garden features, benches and tables to enrich the cultural landscape will all require donations. Meanwhile, the city's work will move to Phase Three, enhancing the waterfront parkland between Pflugger Bridge and Auditorium Shores. Fully realizing the creative, collective vision of Town Lake Park will take years, but guiding it will be a steadfast commitment to community values.

So come play and enjoy. Have a splash, take a walk, or rest and soak up some scenery. But also take the time to enjoy and appreciate the people with whom you share your city, the kind of people who — in thousands of

ways — turn our community's dreams into reality.

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