

409 of 763 DOCUMENTS

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## **Mayor urges bonds for vision of Austin; Wynn wants to make urban development denser and preserve nearby open space**

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Mayor Will Wynn announced Friday that he wants a bond election in 2006 so the city can buy open space and make infrastructure improvements.

He'll ask the City Council to set up a committee in February to recommend what to put on the ballot. It would be the first bond election since 2000.

Wynn wouldn't say what he thinks the money should pay for -- or even how much voters should be asked to approve. But he said he wants the committee's ideas to be in line with Envision Central Texas, the 2004 planning report that called for denser urban development, less sprawl and preserving open space.

Austin "would probably be having a bond election within two years, anyway. That's how we invest and reinvest," Wynn said. "But I want to initiate this discussion now so we can deliver an election by 2006."

With that in mind, Wynn said he'll ask the surrounding counties to offer their own bond proposals to help implement the Envision Central Texas plan.

The bonds would likely require a tax increase, but Austin voters easily passed the last two proposals: about \$163 million in 2000 and about \$712 million in 1998.

Of the city's current tax rate of 44.47 cents per \$100 of appraised value, about 16 cents is used to pay off debt, chief financial officer John Stephens said.

And so the scramble begins to determine what deserves the money. There is an ever-lengthening list of projects the city wants to finance, such as better water lines and better sidewalks.

The **Waller Creek** Tunnel, the on-again, off-again downtown project, would be an obvious contender. The tunnel, which would help curb intense flooding downtown, was expected to cost \$25 million when voters approved it in 1998. But estimates have climbed as high as \$75 million. Benefits are clear, some say: Without flooding, there could be development along the creek similar to that along San Antonio's River Walk that could bring tax money to the city.

"We need to get the tunnel done," said Charlie Betts, director of the Downtown Austin Alliance. "It's critical to the development of our visitor industry and convention business."

Betts said money might also be put toward things such as the Great Streets Master Plan, which called for improving sidewalks and turning Cesar Chavez Street into a grand lakeside boulevard with a median and pedestrian walkways.

The city also is in dire need of better drainage, Wynn said. "We have too many homes and businesses that flood when it rains. A fundamental component of (Envision Central Texas) was better, denser urban areas to take that pressure off of the need to sprawl out across acres of open space."

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The City Council passed a watershed protection master plan in 2001 that called for \$800 million in improvements, such as better storm drains, erosion control along local streams and water-quality retrofits that treat polluted stormwater. The city has increased watershed protection fees that residents pay in the past few years to pay for smaller projects, but more money is needed for an overhaul.

Money to fix aging sewer lines might also end up on the wish list. The lines have caused so many sewage spills that the city launched a \$200 million initiative last year to repair or replace 2,316 miles of pipe in 120 places around town. The city faces stiff fines from the Environmental Protection Agency if the work isn't finished by 2007.

The City Council haggled for several months over what should be put on the 2000 ballot, with some council members pushing for affordable housing and parks money and others asking for direly needed transportation money. Ultimately, voters were asked to let the city borrow \$150 million to pay for transportation projects and \$13.4 million to buy environmentally sensitive land. Both measures were approved.

The \$13 million was used to buy land over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, which supplies drinking water for parts of Central Texas and feeds Barton Springs. Most of it was in the fast-growing area south and east of Dripping Springs.

Environmental groups say they'd want any new money to buy more land in that area.

"There are two regions that the (Lower Colorado River Authority) is planning on extending water service to, and we think those areas would be better off conserved than turned into high-density subdivisions," said Colin Clark of the Save Our Springs Alliance. They are areas around Highway 71, U.S. 290 and FM 1826.

Beyond preserving land, council members say money will be needed to pay for a modern vision of denser development in the urban core. The plan for land just west of the University of Texas, for example, which was approved by the Council last year, will require bigger, better water lines, Council Member Brewster McCracken said.

"In many ways, this could be our last chance for a generation to protect what we love about Austin and pay for the projects we need to do," McCracken said.

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