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Underlying concerns

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What else lies hidden beneath the streets of Austin? An oil storage tank, possibly a century old, spilled thousands of gallons of oil into **Waller Creek** last week, confirming that there's more down there than we know about.

As much as 4,000 gallons of the old oil reached **Waller Creek**, but quick action averted damage to Lady Bird Lake. As much of a headache as the spill was, it wasn't the environmental disaster it could have been.

Still, cleaning up thousands of gallons of oil and water in the heart of downtown and along **Waller Creek** is no picnic. Driskill Hotel guests were inconvenienced, area businesses had to close, and workers were sent home.

The mess was caused by what has become a common problem in Austin - a broken water main. The city is replacing its aging underground infrastructure, but water lines fail with regularity all over town.

When the water line broke, it flooded the underground tank that apparently no one knew was there and forced the oil above ground and into a storm drain. It was a case of old, forgotten Austin returning to mess with bustling, modern Austin.

In a way, it's a fascinating story. Underground tanks once held kerosene or oil for heating and lighting, but who knows how many are still down there waiting to become an environmental nightmare?

A large part of our city is below ground, and some of it has been abandoned and forgotten. Obviously, there is more beneath the streets than water and sewer pipes and utility cables. There are tunnels, tanks, pumps and lifters serving vital functions that we seldom think about.

Unseen and unconsidered, they serve vital functions that all of us depend upon in our daily lives. A busy city tends to build on top of the older infrastructure and forget about it until something calamitous happens.

Last summer, a Consolidated Edison steam pipe erupted in New York City, sending water, mud and debris shooting up 40 stories high. That pipe, which carried steam for heating buildings, was more than 80 years old.

In 1992, a forgotten tunnel beneath the Chicago River was damaged and 250 million gallons of water flooded buildings in the downtown Loop. The tunnel, built in the early 20th century, once was a conduit for getting goods around the city.

Some cities have turned their old underground sections into tourist sites. Underground Atlanta, several blocks of viaducts built over railroad tracks after the Civil War, is now a shopping and entertainment district. Seattle's underground is also a popular tourist haunt. Seattle raised its streets and erected new buildings over the original structures after a devastating fire in the late 19th century.

Austin's underground isn't that well developed, although there is a honeycomb of tunnels beneath the University of Texas, and part of the Capitol is below ground level with tunnels to nearby office buildings.

Quick action prevented the oil spill from becoming an environmental catastrophe. But the episode is a reminder that we don't know everything about the city beneath our feet.

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