



Investigations

## Neighbors see wasted opportunities as Austin bond projects languish

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**(Interactive Media Not Supported by Print)**

AUSTIN (KXAN) - In an old Home Depot parking lot, thousands upon thousands of green compost bins sit waiting to be used in the shadow of the former store.

Like the bins, the city-owned property sits idle, the result of what many see as a wasted opportunity to build up the neighborhood. But it wasn't always going to be that way.

When the city of Austin bought the Home Depot at the corner of Interstate 35 and East St. Johns Avenue a decade ago, it was supposed to become a police substation and municipal court.

Today there are no judges, and there are no police.

The \$8 million property is vacant, home to a sea of compost bins stacked in rows across the parking lot.

To the chagrin of many St. Johns neighborhood locals like B.J. Taylor, the original project will likely never happen.

"Why... just a great big why was this place abandoned, essentially," Taylor said. "We pay taxes like everybody else pays taxes, but we have too long felt like stepchildren and that's not right."

Austin voters approved \$19.7 million in bonds for the East St. Johns public safety project in 2006, after city leaders pitched the substation and court to voters as sorely needed community assets.

The city ultimately spent \$12.38 million on the property and designs, while \$7.31 million lingers unused for the project. A city spokesperson said the city at first "believed" \$19.7 million was enough to purchase land and refurbish the building.

After the city bought the land, officials realized there wasn't enough money.



*St. Johns police substation rendering  
(Courtesy/City of Austin)*

A KXAN analysis of bond spending has found the failed former Home Depot site plan is one of many bond projects approved over the past 18 years that have stalled amid budget shortfalls, bureaucratic delays and unexpected obstacles.

City records show \$140.8 million in bonds approved from 2000 to 2013 remain unused. That total includes more than \$22.6 million specifically earmarked for public safety projects like the ill-fated St. Johns Avenue project.

Meanwhile, the city is gearing up to push voters to approve a 2018 bond package this year valued at more than \$851 million.

### **City leaders call for more oversight**



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City Council Member Greg Casar, whose district includes the former Home Depot, said the city is working on redeveloping the site and the new district-based City Council representation should improve follow-through on bond projects in the future.

“...they don't know who to trust anymore.

“If you had had a District 4 council member back then, those neighborhoods would not have let a city property just sit there collecting dust, collecting graffiti and basically now being a holding place for the city's composting cans,” said Casar.

The council member said residents can already see the \$720 million 2016 mobility bond is being spent more effectively under the new 10-1 district system, where each city council member represents a specific part of Austin

Casar said the city is also changing its strategy on large projects and looking to buy properties with buildings that can be repurposed and used rather than purchasing properties that need a completely new building.

"It's important that we make it clear to the voters that we're asking for the funding to finish out projects that need to get done. And then when we make that commitment to our constituencies that we're going to get a project done, that we actually do that," Casar said.

For Taylor, the delay is more than just about a building. "We have people who — generations of families here and some of them, they don't know who to trust anymore."

## **Community safety projects seemingly going nowhere**

KXAN found several other public safety projects that have been delayed for years.

One example: APD's unbuilt mounted patrol facility that has been in the works for more than seven years. The city purchased land for the facility in 2011 and voters approved \$3.6 million for the project in 2012.

Two years later, the city said the funds were allocated. The goal would have been to complete the project within two-and-a-half years, which was roughly by the end of 2016, according to the Public Works Department.

Today, the land purchased for the police horse facility off McAngus Road near the Circuit of the Americas remains vacant. City officials say the project won't be complete until 2019.

In another case, Austin voters approved \$5.8 million in 2012 to buy land for a police facility in northwest Austin. Six years have passed and the city still hasn't bought the land.

Austin's Real Estate Services Department said it has identified over 100 potential listings and APD has reviewed over 50. As the city has mulled its options over the last eight years, the median Austin home price has increased over 72 percent, according to data from the Austin Board of Realtors.

The 2012 bond package also included almost \$2 million to renovate the city's Nash Hernandez Building to remake it into a joint park patrol and ranger facility on the eastern shores of Lady Bird Lake.



*Rendering for the Nash Hernandez Joint Use Facility along Lady Bird Lake.  
(Courtesy/City of Austin)*

Just over a million dollars in approved bonds remain unused for that project and the building remains boarded up.

In each case, the city says it has run into problems: it's a tough real estate market; design drawings and permits are taking longer than expected; there isn't enough bond money to finish construction, among others.

Casar said the city's explanations for the stalled projects are legitimate, but the city shouldn't use the same excuses over and over.

The people living near the unrealized project have still lost time with a "great community amenity," he added. For the people along East St. Johns, that "amenity" may have reduced crime in a part of town that "has historically been a high crime area," said APD Assistant Chief Ely Reyes.

He said APD has a substation in north Austin designed to house one sector but is currently holding three. The police force has a strong presence in the area, yet crime has been trending upward in the "region as a whole."

"Anytime where you can put a police station in a community that it serves, it's gonna have a direct impact on the crime," Reyes said.

## **'A cautionary tale'**

Rebecca Webber chairs the city's Public Safety Commission and said she was not aware of the public safety projects that failed to materialize until KXAN contacted her about them.

"This is a cautionary tale about how things can fall through the cracks with city government," Webber said in an early April interview. "There needs to be some more oversight in how we implement bonds."

The commission is an advisory board that offers policy and budget recommendations to City Council. Webber said the public should be given more information on the status of projects and there should be a better process for citizens to communicate changing needs in a community.

She also said the commission should demand updates from city staff on project planning, timelines and citizen input. "I think that would be really appropriate, especially as we're all kind of gearing up for yet another bond," she said.

In some cases, Webber said, the community's needs have evolved in the years before a project gets off the ground. After a decade, that change of heart appears to have happened in St. Johns.

At a recent community meeting between neighborhood residents and a Casar office liaison, locals said they would prefer a gathering place or a community center that could help give kids a healthy place to congregate, among other suggestions.

And many residents and local business operators would have liked the city to act on its original plan.

Steve Felgate manages ABC Supply, a roofing and exterior supply shop across the street from the former Home Depot property.

His company has installed over \$20,000 of surveillance equipment due to criminal activity. The store has been burglarized several times and he's had issues with people loitering near the storefront.

The police substation would have improved safety at the store, Felgate said. "I always wonder what they're going to end up doing with it. When people vote on bond projects, and they're passed, they expect something to happen with the money that is voted on."

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