

HISTORY OF COMMUNITY INEQUITIES IN AUSTIN'S WATERSHEDS

City of Austin Watershed Protection Department | November 2022

Prior to 1865

AUSTIN'S NATIVE PEOPLES



Photo: *Tonkawa Tribe*

It is important to begin the history of Austin's watershed protection by acknowledging the people who lived here long before European colonization, relying directly on Austin's watersheds. While the Caddo and Tonkawa tribes were most prevalent, the Comanche, Cherokee, Coahuiltecan, Lipan Apache, Wichita, and Karankawa tribes have also claimed this area as part of their territory. Some of these people continued to live in Austin and the surrounding area long after their territory was stolen. Today, approximately 12,000 people in Travis County identify as "American Indian". (11)

FLAGS OVER TEXAS & THE AUSTIN LIZARD

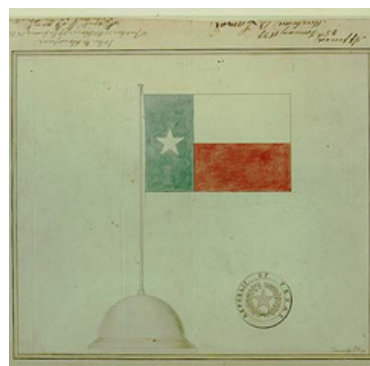


Photo: *Texas State Library*

With Texas claimed for Spain in 1519, Central Texas wasn't fully under Spanish occupation until the late 1600s, which continued until 1821 when Mexico became an independent country. It was then part of the Republic of Texas from 1836 to 1845, with Austin's incorporation occurring in 1839. Austin's population was 856 people. Shortly after that, Texas became part of the confederacy until the end of the Civil War in 1865. (12)

During this time, water was collected from rainwater or wells, or hauled up from the Colorado River in barrels, sometimes utilizing a horse-drawn "travios" nicknamed "The Austin Lizard," which distributed water at 25 cents per barrel.

1865-1928

FREEDMAN COMMUNITIES

In many ways, Austin's community landscape was less segregated than it is today. Throughout all parts of Austin, 15 freedman communities (13) had been established and were beginning to thrive (14). These communities, though predominantly Black, also included people of Mexican descent and other populations experiencing low income. The names of several of these communities (such as Clarksville, Wheatsville, and Barton Springs) are echoed in today's richer and predominantly White neighborhoods in West Austin. In particular, the Red River community along what is now Waller Creek (15), after thousands of years of indigenous occupation, had become a center of Black and Hispanic/Latino cultural life.



Photo: *Austin History Center*

COMMUNITY WELLS

In the 1870s, Community wells were established, and The City Water Company was placed in operation in 1876 (16).

1875-1877

TILLOTSON & THE JIM CROW ERA



Photo: *Austin History Center*

Tillotson College, the first institution of higher education and an historically Black college, was established in 1875. It would later become Huston-Tillotson University (17). 1877 marked the beginning of the Jim Crow Era - an era of laws and practices that enforced segregation. These racist laws were enforced formally through fines and jail time, and informally through violence and lynchings.

1928

AUSTIN'S MASTER PLAN

The 1928 Master Plan was part of a series of nationwide racist and oppressive policies that disrupted communities and led to decades-long extraction of generational wealth. Approved by an all white and male city council, the Master Plan mandated that in order to receive city services, all Black Austinites must move into a 6 square mile area in East Austin. Although written to address "negro" residents, the policy impacted all communities of color (18). The plan was written by a Dallas-based firm, Koch & Fowler, who also helped racially engineer the city through parks, such as Waterloo Park along Waller Creek (19).

1930s

RESIDENTIAL REDLINING

In addition to forced segregation, redlining was also a common practice documented as occurring in hundreds of US cities (20). Redlining refers to racist mapping practices used by the federal government to assess risk for mortgage lending. Recent research assessing 38 major US metropolitan areas (21) shows that neighborhoods redlined in the 1930's have a far higher risk of flooding today.



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1930s-1940s

A THRIVING EAST AUSTIN



Photo: EASTside Magazine

Despite the economic and cultural impacts of being forced to move (22), communities in East Austin grew and began to thrive. Community gardens and fruit trees were established, and small businesses took root with hyper-local support (23,24). In 1933 the first library was moved to East Austin (25). In 1945 the Victory Grill opened on 11th street, becoming a beacon in the community, and host to generations of famous Black musicians (26).

1935

MAY & JUNE 1935 FLOODS

The May and June 1935 floods were considered some of the worst in Central Texas during the 1900s. These floods disproportionately impacted communities of color living along floodplains.



PICA 04119, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library
Photo: Austin History Center

1957

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN



Over time, new Austin policies and ordinances further oppressed communities of color. While redlining from real estate agencies, mortgage lenders, and insurance companies robbed families of their generational wealth, new zoning laws designated property in East Austin as "industrial," including single-family residences. This ushered polluting facilities into the neighborhood, where they caused illness and lower property values (27).

1960s

1960 BOGGY CREEK FLOOD

A severe flood caused the evacuation of 200 East Austin residents and 12 homes to be washed away. This event triggered the beginning of a 20+ year struggle for flood control. This began with an urban renewal project that displaced families.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

As the Civil Rights movement swept across the nation, in Austin, the 1960's saw a new emergence of resistance and solidarity among communities of color, with groups like the Brown Berets and Black Panthers that worked together to fight racial discrimination and injustice (28).

1974 - 1975

AUSTIN WATERWAY ORDINANCE

The 1974 Waterway Ordinance was the City's first watershed protection ordinance, and was well "ahead of its time" for US and Texas regulations. Key features of the ordinance included a call to maintain the "natural and traditional character" which would allow for unpiped and unaltered waterways and requirements to prevent adverse flooding made possible by flood detention.

Lack of flood regulations until 1974 led to many homes being constructed in the wider floodplains of the Blackland prairie and many subdivisions created with undersized drainage systems.



WATERLOO PARK

In 1975, Waterloo Park was established as a "revitalization" project - disrupting Black and Brown families along Red River (29).

1980s

WATER QUALITY ORDINANCES

Water Quality Ordinances focused primarily on mitigating impact in West Austin. These included: The Lake Austin Watershed Ordinance (LAWO); The Barton Creek Watershed Ordinance (BCWO); The Williamson Creek Watershed Ordinance (WCWO); and The Lower Watersheds Ordinance (LWO).

BOGGY CREEK CHANNELIZED

Boggy Creek in East Austin, Texas, was channelized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1980s due to frequent and severe flooding throughout the 1960s and '70s.

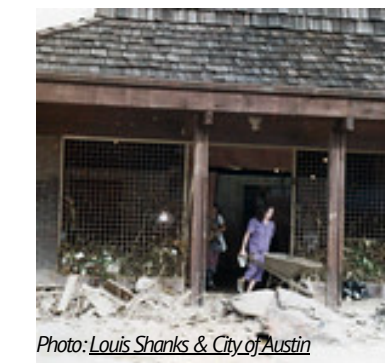


Photo: Louis Shanks & City of Austin

MEMORIAL DAY FLOOD (1981)

In the Memorial Day Flood (30), a historic flooding occurred, killing thirteen and doing more than \$35 million in damage.

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1986

CWO REGULATION



The Comprehensive Watersheds Ordinance (CWO) extended water quality protection throughout the City of Austin's planning area to all but the urban watersheds. The CWO varied the requirements of regulations based on relationships to water supply and degree of urbanization within a watershed. In addition to stream setbacks, water quality controls, and impervious cover limits, key additions of the ordinance included net site area and critical environmental feature protection.

1990s

SMART GROWTH POLICIES

Smart Growth policies of the 1990s established the Desired Development Zone. The low impervious cover limits on the west side and higher limits on the east side increased development pressure and contributed to displacement. Higher impervious cover limits also decreased tree canopy cover, increased urban heat island, and contributed to water quality degradation.

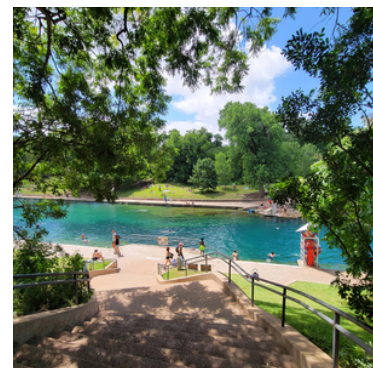


Photo: City of Austin

1991 - 1992 ORDINANCES

The 1991 Urban Watersheds Ordinance (UWO) extended protection to the urban watersheds, including water quality controls and stream buffers.

The 1992 Save Our Springs Ordinance (SOS) addressed development in the Barton Springs Zone. This ordinance was initiated by citizens and included: 1) Requirements for non-degradation of stormwater discharge concentrations; 2) Impervious cover limits of 15% for the recharge zone, 20% for the contributing zone in Barton Creek and 25% for the remaining portion of the contributing zone; and 3) the exclusion of variances. (31)

2003

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

In 1992, tank farms resulting from the Industrial Development Plan were decommissioned thanks to organizers at PODER and EAST.



Photo: PODER Austin

FLOODPLAIN BUYOUTS

In 1998, the City of Austin began the buyout of homes in the floodplains of South Austin. This project was managed by the WPD and completed 2021. (32,33)

2004

AUSTIN AFFORDABLE HOUSING CORP

The 2000's and 2010's brought some progress, but also saw the continued exclusion of communities from important policy-making. In 2003, the Austin Affordable Housing Corporation (subsidiary of HACA) was established to ensure and preserve quality, affordable housing opportunities for low- to moderate-income families, and affordable was largely defined as 60% of the median family income (MFI) (34). While this was initially promising, as of 2021, Austin's MFI was \$98,900, 60% of which is \$59,340, an income not seen by most families of color being displaced in the housing market.

WALNUT CREEK FLOODWALL



Photo: City of Austin

Crystalbrook floodwall completed. Prior to this floodwall, more than 175 homes were subject to repeated and severe flooding from Walnut Creek. The levee/floodwall system incorporated improvements to Loyola Lane to create a flood barrier on the southern boundary of the neighborhood. Another floodwall was constructed along Williamson Creek at Pleasant Valley and Creekbend Dr. in 2005

2005 - 2012

RAINEY STREET REZONING & IMAGINE AUSTIN

In 2005, the rezoning of Rainey Street as commercial property led to the displacement of the remaining families of the historic Red River community (35).

The 2012 Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan lays out a vision for a complete community that responds to the pressures and opportunities of a growing city. Low-income residents and communities of color report being left out of the vision for Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. Resolutions follow, addressing zero waste, resilience, climate change, and other environmental issues.



Photo: Afterglow



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2013 - 2015

HALLOWEEN & MEMORIAL DAY FLOODS

The Halloween Flood on October 31, 2013, heavily damaged more than 600 homes and killed five people. Two flood gauges that the city relies on to monitor flooding malfunctioned and this failure impacted the city's response. At a town hall meeting following the flooding, the City's Police Chief noted their reliance on technology and flood gauges rather than listening to residents who were experiencing flooding. The 2015 Memorial Day Flood & Second Halloween Flood saw flooding throughout the city. In the Onion Creek Halloween Flood about 736 structures were damaged within the city limits and Travis County and three Travis County residents died.

2013

WPO BEGINS TO ADDRESS INEQUITIES

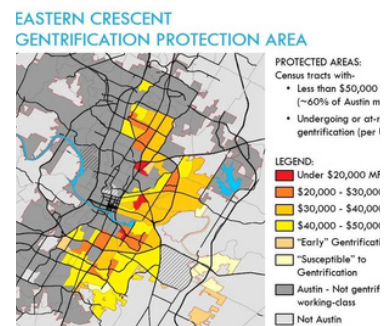


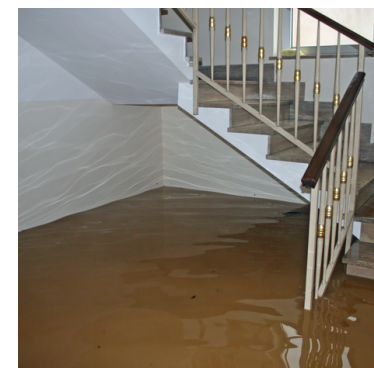
Photo: KXAN

The Watershed Protection Ordinance (WPO) extended protection to small headwaters streams in the Eastern Crescent and added new provisions to protect and restore the health and function of floodplains. Prior to 2013, eastern creeks experienced extensive creek channelization and floodplain modification that diminished the natural character and functioning of waterways. Impervious cover was not addressed in this ordinance.

2017

PEOPLE'S PLAN PROPOSED

The People's Plan described how flooding associated with old and undersized drainage infrastructure can create a hardship on long standing residents and adds to displacement pressure (authored by Susana Almanza, Jane Rivera, and Dr. Fred McGhee).



2018

CODENEXT & COMMUNITY RESPONSE

CodeNEXT, a 1000+ page, untranslated document that includes rezoning for density and other smart growth planning concepts, is criticized by social justice groups as more of the same exclusionary processes. Proponents offer density as an environmental and affordability solution. Social justice advocates raise concerns about the process, displacement, and definitions of affordability. The People's Plan is offered as an alternative. Council took action to terminate the CodeNEXT project in 2018. It came back as the LDC Revision, but that process was ended by Council after the District Court decision in 2020.



Photo: Austin Monitor

Members of Austin's communities were frustrated by the lack of inclusion in the development of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan of 2012, as well as the now defeated CodeNEXT of 2018 (36, 37, 38).

NOAA RAINFALL STUDY PROMPTS FLOODPLAIN UPDATE

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration completed a historical rainfall study entitled Atlas 14. In November 2019, the city updated its floodplain maps in response to this study. "Around 3,000 more Austin properties will find themselves in high-risk floodplains thanks to a new National Weather Service study called Atlas 14. Those new flood designations could impact everything from what you pay for insurance to how you build your home. With Atlas 14, the National Weather Service added about a quarter-century worth of data to its current models and determined that heavier rains around Austin were more common than previously thought." (39) The neighborhoods protected by the Crystalbrook and Creek Bend floodwalls were shown to be back in the 100-year floodplain as part of the new study, making flood insurance very expensive for residents

2019

PUBLIC CAMPING BANS LIFTED

On June 21, 2019, City Council amended three ordinances to remove bans on camping in public areas as long as it did not unreasonably block public property or endanger public health or safety (including the health or safety of the person camping). This was intended to decriminalize not having a place to live.



Photo: Texas Tribune

On October 17, 2019, City Council made several revisions to the city ordinance to prohibit camping in certain areas downtown and on sidewalks.

SHOAL CREEK DROWNING

In May 2019, Craig L. Mayes, a man experiencing homelessness is washed downstream and drowns on Shoal Creek while attempting to bathe.

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2020

COVID-19 RESPONSE



During the Covid-19 pandemic, the City of Austin paused encampment cleanup activities for sites that did not pose a significant risk to the campers to adhere to the national best practices of not displacing or relocating individuals to protect the health and safety of our entire community.

2021

WINTER STORM URI

After Winter Storm Uri, communities called for faster and more comprehensive emergency response to disasters, including major flooding events. The storm dropped more than six inches of snow on Austin and was responsible for 381 water line breaks in city pipelines. Additionally, due to plumbing issues, over 200 apartment complexes lost water.



Photo: *Austin Chronicle*

PROP B & HOUSE BILL 1925

On May 1, 2021, Austin voters approved Proposition B, making it a criminal offense (Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine) for anyone to sit, lie down, or camp in public areas and prohibiting solicitation at specific hours and locations. This overturned the previous City Council actions.

On Sept. 1, 2021, House Bill 1925 took effect, creating a statewide camping ban.

A City of Austin program called the Housing-focused Encampment Assistance Link (HEAL) is making progress in housing folks in encampments, but Austin does not currently have enough emergency housing units for everyone.

2022

FEMA RULE CHANGE FOR DEEDS



In September 2021, FEMA announced it will offer other forms of documentation beyond the deed (i.e. property tax payments) to secure individual assistance during disasters. Prior to this, people seeking FEMA home rehabilitation allotments had to provide the deed as proof of ownership, leaving many nonwhite families at a disadvantage, due to the prevalence of inter-generational home ownership and resulting likelihood of a lost deed.

HARRIS CREEK SPILL OF TOXIC MATERIAL

In January of 2022, Samsung reported a toxic leak into a Harris Creek tributary. The spill exceeded 6 million gallons of polluted stormwater. In May of 2022, Samsung won a prize from the state for environmental excellence.



Photo: *Austin American-Statesman*

WPD LAUNCHES "RAIN TO RIVER"



In April of 2022, the City of Austin Watershed Department launches [Rain to River](#): A Strategic Plan to Protect Austin's Creeks and Communities. This website includes an acknowledgement of what they have heard over the last 20 years from community input sessions.

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