Parklands and Creeks

Parkland along Town Lake and its interconnecting greenbelts on six of the eight creeks represent a strategic open space framework for guiding and shaping the form of urban development, and for creating an integrated mix of recreation, business, entertainment and housing.

The full significance of growth shaping and waterfront recreation values is yet to be realized, but a window of opportunity exists to capitalize on rapid and dramatic change now occurring in the Corridor. Timing is critical, for some major decisions may be irreversible. Two recent purchases of parkland and support for renewal of public waterfront facilities demonstrate a strong commitment to a Central Park system legacy.

Parks, Recreation and Cultural Facilities on Town Lake

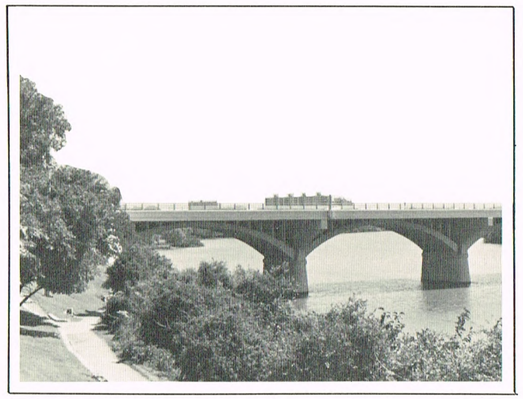
Auditorium Shores Amphitheater
Austin Area Garden Center
Austin High Tennis Center
Austin Nature Center
Boat Ramps (4)
Canoe and Sailboat Rental
Coliseum
Eilers Park-Deep Eddy Pool
Fiesta Gardens
Martin Pool/School Park
Metz Park-Pool-Recreation Center
Palmer Auditorium
Pitch and Putt Golf Course
Sports Fields (13)
Zachary Scott Theater
Zilker Park-Barton Springs Pool
Zilker Clubhouse/Overlook
Zilker Hillside Theater

Source: *Parks and Recreation Department*

Parklands—The design theme established in the original 1968 *Town Lake Comprehensive Plan* called for development of a place of "quiet beauty, dignity and pleasure". Activity nodes were designated for six beaches on the north bank and five shores on the south bank, connected by a system of linear open spaces and the major creeks.

Quantitatively, the inventory of parklands and facilities is substantial; dedicated parkland adjacent to the lake comprises 754 acres. The extensive trail system, large and small park nodes, passive open space areas, swimming facilities, observation points, landings, and other facilities constitute an impressive public investment in the Corridor. Concessions provide opportunities for renting canoes, sailboats, and electric-powered boats.

Qualitatively, deficiencies are apparent. A lack of waterfront facilities is most obvious: no fishing piers, few boat launching and picnic areas, no lighting, and no well-facilitated outdoor performing area. Basic facilities are at a premium—shade, drinking fountains, restrooms and pavilions. Infra-structure repair is required due to wear and age, which is currently being addressed through a restoration plan and a recent appropriation of $2,000,000 from the City's general fund.



Paid concerts and special events have created ill-will in the community because of exclusionary use (fences) and high environmental impact, suggesting a need for clearly stated goals and policies for appropriate public uses of the water and shoreline.

The present irrigation system is inadequate, not fully automated nor water conserving and uses potable water. Turf is not healthy due to poor soils and high compaction. Much of the landscape material is water dependent and not indigenous to the area, although a limited attempt has been made to introduce wildflowers to the north shore.

No integrated management program for both natural and intensive use areas is employed to achieve multiple objectives of ecological maintenance and park attractiveness. The result is either over-grooming of shoreline vegetation which frequently results in noxious weeds and undesirables introduced into the park landscape, or ignored areas that become overgrown, block views and collect litter. High impact maintenance and park police vehicles contribute substantially to soil compaction.

The design context of Town Lake parkland is not well defined and understood; therefore some plantings, use of building materials, architecture and signage lack continuity and "sense of place". Waterfront design emphasis is on the trail system which perpetuates domination by joggers.

Multiple use waterfront objectives are not met at Fiesta Gardens (fencing); sports fields are singular in use along West First Street, at Butler Shores east of Barton Creek and in Zilker Park.

Problems of legibility, continuity and organization of the vast parklands and public facilities have resulted from a lack of comprehensive planning and design to keep pace with increasing use and diverse recreation interests. Management response may be described more as reactive to external pressures and impacts than proactive to community needs.

Approved Town Lake Parks Improvements

Austin Nature Center	complete Phase II including exhibit pavilion, pond improvements, nature trails
Bouldin Creeks	land acquisition of Greenbelt
Colorado River	land acquisition below Longhorn Dam
Festival Beach	expand parking; new restrooms
Fiesta Gardens	basic upgrading based on neighborhood site plan to improve use
RBJ Park	new recreational and waterfront facilities for seniors and disabled
Shoal Creek	complete flood repairs
Town Lake	basic restoration of park facilities; comprehensive planning
Waller Creek	complete landscape beautification; lighting; irrigation
Zilker Park	major park renovation to upgrade park

Source: *Parks and Recreation Department*

Creeks—A hallmark of the Austin park system has been recognition of the abundant scenic, recreational and growth-shaping values of the creeks connecting with Town Lake. Six of the eight creeks carry greenbelt status, are accessible by trail and vary widely in character—from dramatic and pristine Barton Creek to the linear park on Blunn Creek and the more urbanized Waller Creek Walkway. Significant resource values of the creek landscapes include springs, pools, shelter caves, bluffs and typically the most interesting urban vegetation. A total of 23 miles of greenbelt

trail is available to the public from Town Lake providing a basis for excellent linkage to neighborhoods and downtown. An acquisition program is designed to acquire greenbelts on both East and West Bouldin Creeks but progress is slow due to land costs and urban development impacts.

Despite considerable public investment on these urban creeks, they are subject to a lax land use guidance system and therefore do not capitalize on their full potential as open space connectors to Town Lake and as form-shapers of urban development. Exemplary is the Waller Creek Walkway, a splendid concept of public creek beautification as a catalyst for mixed use redevelopment, but resulting in a disjointed arrangement of hotels, offices, condominiums and restaurants. A weak creek overlay zone does not require urban design regulations for set-back, height limitations and architectural control.

Town Lake Creeks and Functions

Barton Creek	an ecologically significant canyon accessed by a nine mile nature trail and greenbelt
Blunn Creek	the most ecologically intact urban creek; linear park, recreation facilities and trail
Bouldin Creeks	highly urbanized creeks, primarily drainage functions
Dry Creek	unique creek traversing Austin Nature Center site; interesting escarpment
Johnson Creek	urbanized greenbelt with hike and bike trail; marsh at mouth
Shoal Creek	1948 citizen-generated trail provided model for city's greenbelt system; extends from Town Lake to 38th Street
Waller Creek	lower creek beautified as a walkway to stimulate downtown mixed use development; Waterloo Park and Symphony Square are anchors; traverses University campus

Source: *Parks and Recreation Department*

Of even more critical nature, storm water flows create severe bank erosion problems, carry litter and debris to the lake, and contribute to extensive deposits of sediment in the floodways and at the mouths of the creeks. Conflicts in the design of flood control and bank stabilization efforts are evident, as city agencies independently address mutliple objectives of recreation and drainage. Other utilitarian functions of urban government impact the creek and lake environment. For example, large sewer vents on West Bouldin Creek and Pleasant Valley Road create noxious odors along the lake.

The mouths of the creeks, where water meets water, have strategic gateway/anchor potential for neighborhoods and the downtown area. Only Shoal Creek and Barton Creek make positive statements in this regard. Roadway improvements for East Riverside Drive do not include design for connecting the Blunn Creek hike and bike trail to Town Lake.

The complexity of issues related to the Town Lake creeks suggests a need for a more comprehensive information base for intelligent public and private decisions in the Corridor.

Visual Context

The visual image of the ten mile Town Lake waterfront varies considerably. However, there is a consistent theme of "open" and "built" space, of "hard" and "soft" edges.

The most scenic portion of the lake is on the west end, offering the most enticing views of the Balcones rock cliffs, the natural opposite shoreline and the Hill Country. However, viewpoints of this area are limited because of a lack of public access.

Seven viewpoints of the State Capitol in or along the waterfront are protected by ordinance; five others have been identified but are not protected by legislation. The strongest visual axis is tree-lined Congress Avenue, connecting the Capitol with Town Lake.

Views of the lake are offered along Festival Beach, Waller Beach, South Lakeshore Boulevard and West First Street. Linear views of the lake are best from the six bridges and Longhorn Dam, with the most spectacular views offered from the pedestrian bridge suspended beneath MoPac. The widest part of the reservoir near Longhorn Dam creates panoramas of water shoreline and urban landscape. A dramatic view of the Colorado River is possible at Longhorn Dam but access is limited and the views are constricted.

Excellent views of the downtown skyline are possible from West Riverside Drive, Lakeshore Boulevard, the rock cliffs in the Stratford neighborhood, and the Zilker Park Clubhouse.

Views of the lake are blocked in several locations by buildings, notably Austin High School, high rise condominiums and hotels, the Holly Power Plant, office buildings and apartments. Visual contact with the lake is also severely restricted in four areas: an illegible and confusing area on the south shore from the First Street Bridge to South Lakeshore Boulevard, along East First Street including the Rainey Neighborhood, along the Balcones rock cliffs, and the shoreline owned by the University of Texas.

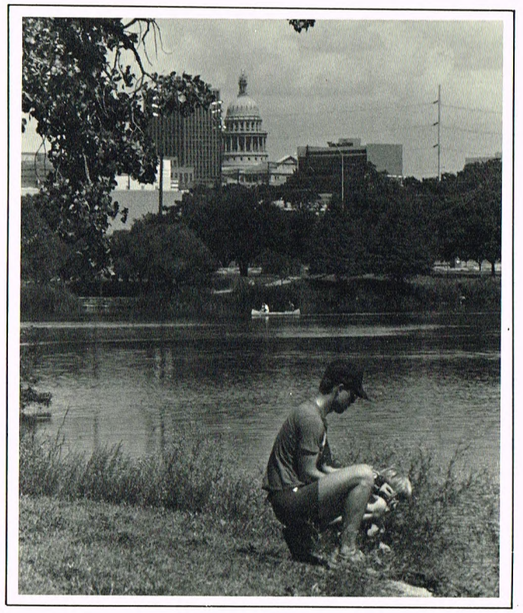
The creek corridors offer lateral, soft edge corridors, but only Barton Creek rates high as visually accessible and of a scenic quality to generate positive image and identification. The views from both the Barton Springs Road bridge and the pedestrian bridge are outstanding.

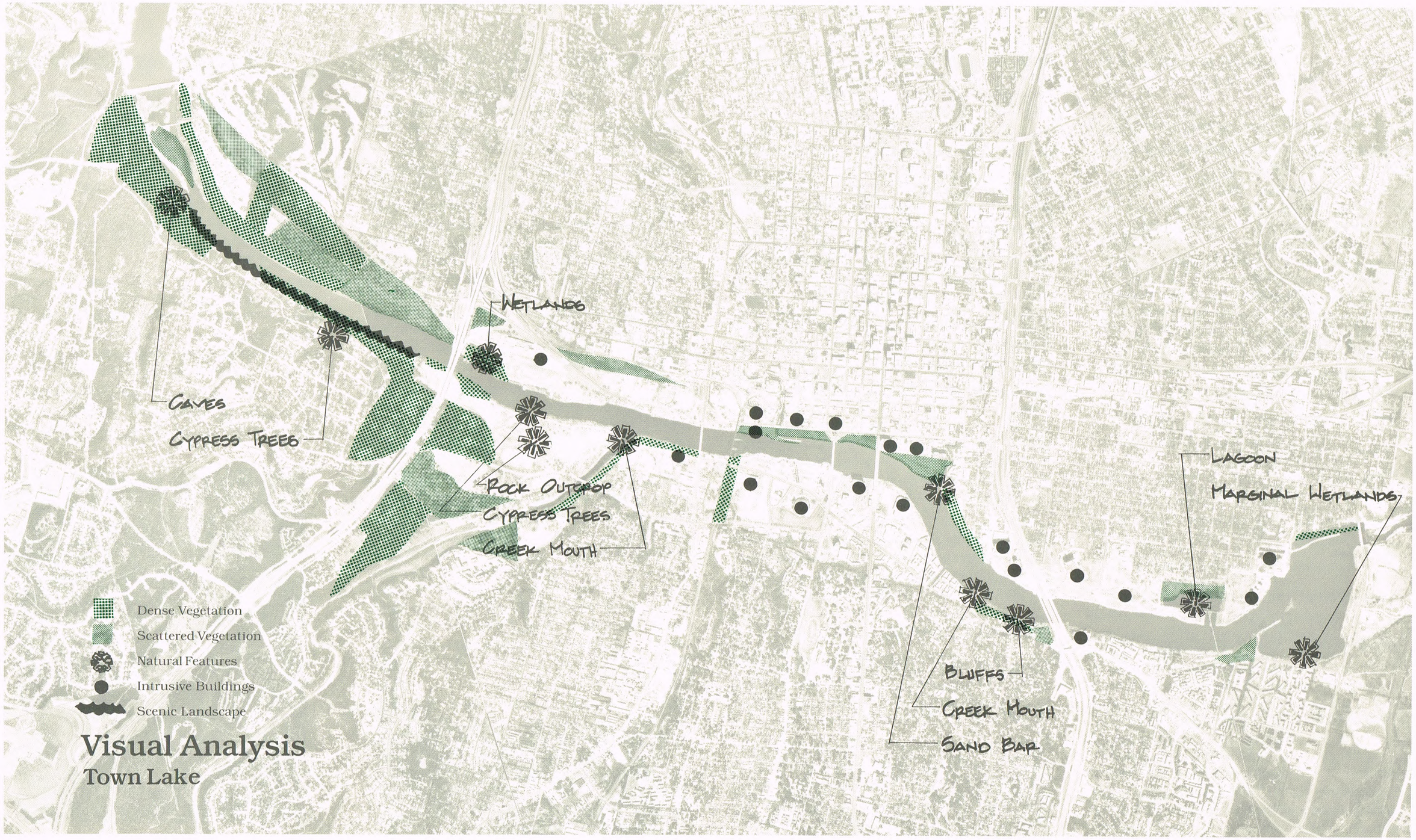
Gateways to the lake along the major north-south roadways do not represent high quality visual characteristics, although the Parks and Recreation Department has recently developed several colorful horticulture displays in traffic islands and medians, and along the waterfront.

A proliferation of traffic signs, exposed utility and traffic control apparatus and overhead transmission cables clutter and detract from the visual quality of the Corridor. The unpainted MoPac railroad bridge is also a visual distraction.

Robert E. Lee Road is an especially scenic drive along Barton Creek, but roadway misfits (barriers) and advertising signs from a nearby sports field do little to enhance the visual image. Few parkways, boulevards or specially landscaped roadways exist in the Corridor.

Unlike older waterfronts, few landmarks of architectural significance add legibility and visual structure to the waterfront. Exceptions





Visual Analysis
Town Lake

Capitol View Corridors

Protected Views
- Pleasant Valley at Lakeshore Boulevard
- Lakeshore Boulevard—Longhorn Shores
- Lamar Bridge
- Lou Neff Point/Barton Creek Pedestrian Bridge
- MoPac Bridge
- Zilker Clubhouse
- Red Bud Trail

Views Not Protected
- Montopolis Drive/Bridge
- Northcliffe/Norwood Park
- W. Side Lamar Bridge (trail)
- Barton Creek Pedestrian Bridge East
- Stratford Drive in Zilker Park
- Grove Park (Colorado River Park)
- Krieg Complex

Source: *Office of Land Development Services*

are the graceful arches of the Lamar and Congress Avenue bridges, and the restored Buford Fire Tower. The auditorium, coliseum, and utility plants are reference points but have little visual quality as civic buildings.

This brief summary analysis of visual characteristics of the Corridor leads to the conclusion that a more complete understanding of visual elements is required to provide a basis for urban design guidelines and policies. It is also apparent that the City itself could provide leadership in upgrading and enhancing the visual quality by adopting more sensitive design standards.

Water Quality

Because Town Lake is the lower reservoir in a chain of seven Highland Lakes, an awareness of its relationship to the overall lake system is essential. Most of the water in Town Lake comes from Lake Austin, which in turn originates from Lake Travis. Therefore, maintenance of water quality in both Lake Travis and Lake Austin is crucial to the health of Town Lake. Water quality in Town Lake in future years will depend in large part on the effectiveness of water quality management programs for the upper lakes developed by State water officials, the Lower Colorado River Authority and the City of Austin.

As a recipient of water from upper reserviors, water quality in Town Lake is of good quality and is relatively unpolluted. As a recipient of the creeks which drain much of Austin, Rollingwood and West Lake Hills, however, water quality is poor after storm runoff and therefore becomes the greatest detriment to the lakes as potential risks to human health and aquatic life. Typically debris, floats and styrofoam cups provide visual evidence of the problem, negative public response, and high maintenance costs. Urban storm water components include a long list of pollutants, which if left unchecked could reduce substantially the recreation and aesthetic value of the lake, and could increase sedimentation and nutrient loading.

Common Run-Off Pollutants

- Dust and dirt
- Street refuse and sidewalk sweepings
- Discarded debris, litter, oil, anti-freeze
- Building and demolition wastes
- Industrial and vehicular emissions
- Petroleum leakage from automobiles
- Asbestos from brake linings
- Particulates from tire treads
- Household and lawn refuse
- Fecal droppings from pets
- Sanitary sewer leakage
- Septic system overflows and failures
- Fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides
- Fumigants

Source: *Lake Austin Growth Management Plan*

Watershed protection strategies are in place for Lake Austin and Lake Travis. However, watershed and waterway development regulations for the Town Lake drainage have inadequate development standards and runoff control measures. There are no comprenhensive measures for water treatment and filtering to reduce pollutant concentrations in Town Lake. New development projects connect to existing storm sewers which either empty into area creeks or directly into Town Lake.

Town Lake Drainage Projects

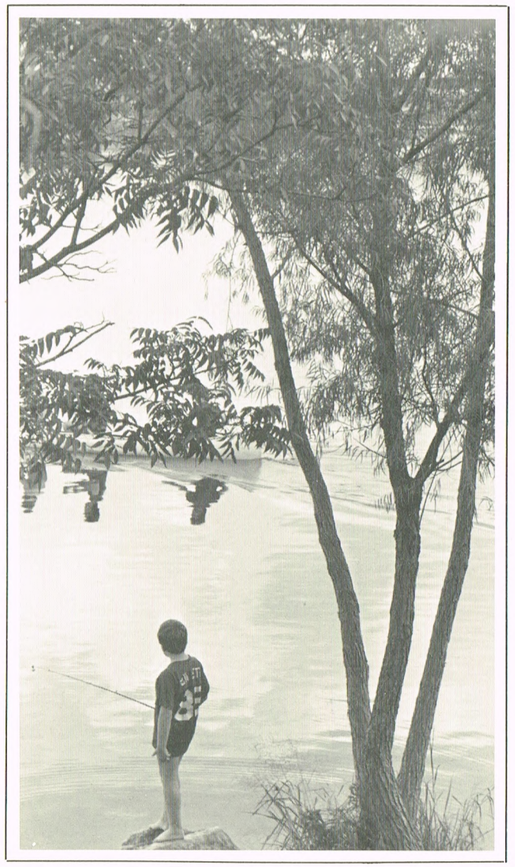
Approved:
- Johnson Creek Improvements and Bypass
- Lower Shoal Creek Flood Control
- East Bouldin Creek Improvements
- Waller Creek Flood Improvements and Bypass

Proposed:
- Shoal Creek Bypass

Source: *Public Works Department*

According to a recent federal study of urban runoff, limited data on toxic materials such as pesticides and heavy metals indicate that few of these materials are detectable in the waters of Lake Austin and Town Lake. However, it is noted that these pollutants may well have accumulated in the sediments and may have gone undetected. Further, water samples may not have coincided with runoff events.

A study conducted recently by the Austin-Travis County Health Department showed common game fish in Town Lake have not been significantly tainted by pesticide residues and are safe to eat. However, the public is cautioned not to consume carp and shad, which contain unsafe levels of DDT and Chlordane. The use of DDT was banned in 1972, but the chemical remains for many years; Chlordane is commonly used for termite control. These chemicals and other household products including discarded oil and antifreeze are carried to Town Lake through storm drains.

It can be concluded that the City should pursue practical methods of retrofitting existing development and requiring more stringent development and disposal standards if the quality of water in Town Lake is to be maintained for recreational purposes.

Furthermore, because of the complex urban hydrology of the lake and its creeks, a more comprehensive study is required to develop a sound strategy for protecting water quality.