

THE

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AUSTIN LETTER

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Dear Client:

Texas weather is fickle, going from droughts to floods, often in the same year. The dams at Lakes Travis and Buchanan protect the Austin area from floods. Is there a way to use these floodwaters, or even heavy rainfalls, to drought-proof our future water supply? Yes, and there's a grandiose plan to make that happen.

Start with the plight of our growing neighbor to the south – San Antonio. The Alamo City doesn't have a mighty river, such as the Colorado slicing through the Austin area, to provide its water. It must rely on undependable aquifers as a place to suck water from below the earth's surface to service its residents and businesses. **Santone has a desperate long-term need for a dependable water supply**, unlike Austin (see our 9/26/03 edition).

Enter the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA). While the LCRA is managing to meet the current water needs of its customers, it also has a need to prepare for **increased demands of a growing population in the Austin area**. So what if the heavy rainfall that occurs east of here, and the floodwaters that periodically hit us, could be harnessed by the LCRA before the waters flow into the Gulf of Mexico?

The vision is to build a large number of reservoirs (along with massive pump stations to grab the floodwaters that roar down the Colorado River) to **capture the vast amounts of rain that fall from the heavens periodically**. Yeah, but how do you pay for such a massive project? You don't. You let San Antonio pay for it — in return for using *some* of the captured water.

Can you spell “w-i-n—w-i-n”? San Antonio, through a series of connecting pipelines to the reservoirs, would get a massive, dependable water supply. And the LCRA would get more future water via the planned 50% - 50% split with Santone.

Wait a minute. **Would San Antonio pay 100% of the tab for just 50% of the water? That's the plan.** The LCRA is contributing expertise and management of the water – no small contribution. And Santone is desperate for water.

There's no question it's costly, as well as grandiose. The studies alone over the next 6 years will cost about \$40 million (also paid by San Antonio). But, if the plan clears all of the hurdles, and since a lot of Texas cities are in the same water-deprived boat as San Antonio, the LCRA's GM **Joe Beal** predicts this “could be a **model used around the state** before we are done.”

With all this talk about water up-and-down the Colorado River, what about the up-and-down Highland Lakes jewel, Lake Travis?

Lake Travis is more than just a 65-mile long beautiful lake in the heart of Central Texas. It has **saved countless lives and changed the face of downtown Austin**, because it is the major flood control body for this area. Back before Mansfield Dam (that created Lake Travis) was built in the 1930s, floods regularly came roaring down the Colorado River – washing away buildings and people in its path.

Because the water spread out widely beyond the river's banks during flood times, many of today's downtown area buildings, north and south of the river, would **look vastly different – or simply not be there** – if the flooding had not been contained by the creation of Lake Travis. This flood-control function dictates that the levels of Lake Travis fluctuate dramatically.

The lake level must be kept low enough to store water when the rains and runoff come cascading down from upstream. **When floods occur, the lake rises impressively**, and controlled releases of water downstream keep the impact at a minimal level. In drought times, it dips even lower. Islands and tree tops appear and recreation on the popular lake becomes quite hazardous.

Then you have the rice farmers way down river, near the Gulf Coast. The farmers have iron-clad, long-standing water contracts with the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) that allow them to **draw down massive quantities of water to flood their fields**. During “normal” rainfall years, the **water level in Lake Travis drops discernibly** as the farmers exercise their legal right to suck water out of the river.

To give you an idea of just how much Colorado River water is used for irrigation purposes, all you need to know is the LCRA's largest single customer – **the City of Austin, serving a huge population and a vast array of businesses and industry – uses only 20% of the water supply**. Irrigation is, by far, the biggest user of Colorado River water.

So, if/when the ambitious plan to build reservoirs and basins downstream, paid for by San Antonio, comes to fruition (see the previous story), **Lake Travis will be a huge beneficiary**. Remember, the LCRA would keep 50% of all the water captured by this massive water collection and storage system, with San Antonio siphoning off the remainder. The LCRA can use the water it gains in this process to meet the contractual irrigation needs of the nearby rice farmers. This means Lake Travis would not need to be lowered to service irrigation demands.

Bottom line: **the LCRA would be able to keep more water, longer, in Lake Travis**. This would greatly reduce the drought-induced drop-down in water levels. And it would greatly enhance recreation, businesses and just plain “quality of life living” along the already-popular lake.

Is UTAustin a Peter Pan school where students “put off dealing with the pressures of the real world by escaping to the perpetual bliss of Never Never Land,” as one national publication claims? UTAustin’s low graduation rate puts it atop the pub’s Peter Pan list.

If past trends hold true, the fall 2003 incoming freshman class, with the **highest academic qualifications in the university’s history, will graduate less than 40% of its members in four years.** And after six years, only 71.5% will graduate. Is it true, then, UTAustin is a place where students find campus life so enjoyable they stay as long as they can?

Ummmm, kinda. **Jim Vick**, VP/Student Affairs, says the university’s broad range of study is one factor. “The tendency of students to **change majors** leads to delays in graduation,” he says. “However, people also really **like living in Austin** and like being here at the university.” The **academic rigors** – especially in demanding fields such as engineering, architecture and pharmacy – also cause some students to take longer to finish their education, Vick added.

Whatever the reason, the low graduation stats contribute to UTAustin maintaining its status as the **nation’s largest single campus institution.** Fall enrollment was down slightly (1.6%), the total number of students is still 51,438. Big, in this case, is not better. Well, if that’s the case, is UTAustin going to continue down this path? Not if president **Larry Faulkner** has his way.

“We made a strategic decision last fall to **reduce the number of freshmen** in the class of 2003, despite an 11% rise in applications to 24,500,” Faulkner said in his state of the university address. As far as the 39.2% *four-year* graduation rate, “we **need to reach a figure above 50 percent**, but in the near term 42 percent is my target,” he said. And speaking of the 71.5% *six-year* graduation rate, he said “we must raise this rate above 75 percent.”

If Faulkner accomplishes his goals, the Peter Pan ranking by Kaplan Publishing’s *2004 Unofficial, Unbiased Guide to the 328 Most Interesting Colleges* may go away. By the way, the *Guide* did list UTAustin in great categories such as “**Valedictorian’s Choice**,” “**Class President’s Choice**” and “**Best Value.**”

The environmental group concerned about what you see is crowing about what didn’t happen in the Texas Legislature. It’s also planning a pilot project for Austin.

“Scenic Austin,” battles billboards along highways, and said “billboard companies were behind the introduction of several bills that would take control of signage away from local municipalities.” The bills did not pass, so “Scenic Austin” claimed victory. Also the group is seeking funding for a pilot project to beautify Airport Blvd by adding trees and landscaping to the north side of the street between IH35 and RR2222.

It's that time of year when publications such as this one (which has print as well as Web subscribers) are required to publish certain information about print circulation and ownership. This relates to our Periodical Mailing Permit. This US Postal Service permit is important because it gives a "preferred" status to newspapers/newsletters to help ensure timely delivery.

Traditionally, we've taken this opportunity to tell you a bit about how we operate. First, we're pleased most of our subscribers are now getting the newsletter fast, for the same price, on our Website, www.AustinLetter.com. We notify Web subscribers by e-mail when each Friday's issue is posted on the Web, about the time our print edition goes to the printer.

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During the preceding 12 months, now that most subscribers get their newsletter on-line, we only printed an average of 95 copies of each issue. We had an average of 76 paid mail subscribers, with 9 distributed free, for a total distribution of 85, of which 90% was paid circulation. We held 10 copies for office use. Our report to the US Postal Service this year includes actual figures for the 09/26/03 issue, when we printed 88 copies, of which 71 were paid mail subscribers, 7 were distributed free, for a total distribution of 78. A total of 10 copies were held for office use. Of the 09/26/03 issue's circulation, 91% was to paid subscribers.

We're especially proud that during our 24+ years of publishing this Letter, we've never missed a Friday deadline. Occasionally, the Post Office may not get your mail processed on a timely basis, but they try very hard to make sure your copy is delivered to you on schedule. If you're not receiving your printed copy by Tuesday of each week, we'd like to know.

If at any time, from anywhere you travel, you'd like access to the current newsletter early each Friday morning, we encourage you to switch to an Internet subscription. Obviously, there's no additional charge. Finally, let me say how pleased we are to have you as a subscriber.

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Sincerely



Editor/Publisher