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# AUSTIN LETTER

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P.O. Box 1905 / Austin, Texas 78767-1905 / 512-498-9495 / Fax 512-327-1976 / e-mail [News@AustinLetter.com](mailto:News@AustinLetter.com)

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Dear Client:

**A very bitter environmental battle in Austin in the 1980s may be brewing again, but this time it is being couched in catastrophic terms.**

Back then, environmentalists, developers, local and federal governmental entities locked horns over **habitat in west Austin and Travis County that was home to two endangered species of birds, the Golden Cheeked Warbler and the Black Capped Vireo.** Seems these two rare species nest in hilly, wooded areas composed primarily of old-growth Ashe Juniper (colloquially called cedars, famed for “cedar fever” allergies). And while the birds love the area, humans do as well. It is very attractive place to live. Hence the conflict.

After protracted periods of rancor, an agreement was reached among the parties that allowed **70% of such wooded areas to be developed as long as 30% was set aside to remain in its natural state, providing habitat for the birds.** These set-aside areas are generally referred to as preserves and provide much of the large wooded areas that abut western residential and commercial areas. And that proximity is the problem.

**Today’s environmentalists want to keep the hard-fought preserves in their natural state, adding to the natural beauty of the hills and ravines.** But after last summer’s close-by massive fires to the east and west of the city of Austin (in addition to widespread blazes in West Texas), safety-minded interests are calling for **clearing and cutting some of the preserve acreage to protect lives, nearby homes and other structures from fast-moving wildfires.**

Those who want to keep the preserves for the birds argue that more protection is needed for the developed areas, rather than altering the preserve. Said one: **“There are steps that can be taken with building codes, roadway designs, landscaping practices, etc., that can help mitigate the potential loss of life and property without destroying the environment.”** They also point out that available fire retardant gels can be sprayed on homes and other structures.

On the other side are the safety-minded entities who claim that if wildfires erupt in or even near these preserves, **“It will be a disaster of major proportions.”** For more detail on what is meant by this claim, check out the next item, while at the same time, be aware that this issue should soon move beyond this rhetoric.

**The Austin Public Safety Commission is weighing in on whether pristine preserve land in the western portions of Austin and Travis County should be modified to prevent a fast-moving storm of fire with greater destructive power than a major hurricane or tornado.**

Always plain-spoken, blunt and fearless, the vice chair of the Austin Public Safety Commission, **Mike Levy argues that the cedar-brakes that blanket the Austin-area preserves, hills and canyons provide massive amounts of fuel.** And, if ignited, they become fast-moving storms of fire enveloping anything and everything in their way. Here's his blunt way of putting it:

**“Unless the people who manage the preserve land decide to give up a little acreage, to work with their fire department or emergency service district to determine what they need in terms of fire breaks and access roads and what underbrush needs to be cleared, we all will be burdened with the great risk of not only losing all of the land and its ecosystem and putting an enormous number of structures at risk, but also putting the lives of firefighters and civilians at risk.”**

He went on to say **“we can talk about various plants and animals, but if we're not realistic, we will lose them all,** and it will be forever and a day before the land restores itself, assuming that it can.”

The damage will not be limited to the preserve areas, said Levy. **“These fire storms will blow east into West Lake Hills, Rollingwood, the city of Austin and entire neighborhoods will be destroyed.** When a fire storm blows into areas of dense residential development, and some homes are ignited (often by the *heat* and not by *flame*), obviously your fire department will not have the resources to come to try to prevent the fire from spreading to other neighborhoods.”

**“It will be a catastrophe of monumental proportions, enveloping homes that are not close to vegetation** because we have seen in other fire storms around the country that **structures will serve as the fuel** to allow the fire storm to continue to spread very rapidly.” **“This is not hypothetical thinking,”** he said. “We have witnessed this recently in western Travis County, in Bastrop, and throughout Texas (a massive number of acres in true fire storms). In the last few years, a fire storm in San Diego County took hundreds of homes.”

Levy's warning: “There are very few certainties in this most uncertain world in which we live, but the one guarantee we can make is that if we don't learn from history and do not choose to lose a little now, to compromise in the face of hard reality, **we will be at great risk of losing everything, too much habitat, entire species, every piece of vegetation, too many homes, too many people that will be in the way of a fire storm.**” Levy says it will be a disaster of major proportions that possibly can be mitigated if the Austin City Council is willing to act. However, Levy also offers the opinion that city officials may be reluctant to face a firestorm of criticism from environmentalists if they tackle this issue, so they may do nothing. Stay tuned.

**Most everyone agrees that one of the Austin area's best assets is its trees, hills, canyons and vistas. In fact, a new, national ranking refers to the "staggeringly beautiful, rough-hewn Hill Country" as it named Austin one of the nation's Ten Best Places to Retire.**

The ranking by *CBS MoneyWatch* lumped all ten together, without picking a #1. It said: "these retirement spots have economies that have remained relatively vibrant, which means **the lifestyle you see today is likely to be around tomorrow.**" The report also said "our list is an attempt to find the **best places for the good life.**" And this is a rare national lifestyle ranking that did NOT lead with the music scene. Here's how the review started.

"Austin is a big city in a small town disguise," noted *CBS MoneyWatch*.

**"The outdoors is the biggest attraction.** The staggeringly beautiful, rough-hewn Hill Country, spring-fed swimming holes, a string of lakes along the Colorado River, and 10 months of warm temperatures (too warm in the summer) draw hikers and boaters and bikers outdoors. **Lance Armstrong** lives and trains here, and **Lady Bird Johnson Lake** (Town Lake to the locals), which runs through the city's center, is a favorite training spot for rowers."

Obviously, it mentioned the music scene, but quickly moved on to other Austin assets: "And of course there's the music," the report continued. **"Willie Nelson and Alison Krauss** music, to be consumed along with barbecued ribs and Lone Star long necks. Or, for the high-tech set, **Norah Jones**, to be consumed along with interactive startups, at the annual South by Southwest (SXSW) conference."

It went on to point out **"there's also a lyric opera, a symphony, and a ballet company.** But that's the icing. For the practical retiree, **housing costs** (median price: \$235,000), good **medical facilities**, the many programs at **The University of Texas**, and **no state income tax** are the cake."

This survey is different from most. "Whenever experts set out to find 'great places to retire,' they tend to dwell on cost of living and health care. Both important considerations, sure, but talk to retirees, even in this age of rampaging austerity, and you'll find most are looking forward to a **retirement filled with friends, travel, volunteer opportunities, a wide variety of activities – both physical and intellectual,**" noted *CBS MoneyWatch*. "In other words, **a rich life, richly lived.**" Can you spell A-u-s-t-i-n?

Another factor that was considered: places where a future retiree's **friends and family would love to come visit.** "After all, if you're striking out on a new life with new friends, it's a bonus to get lots of visits from old friends." Other locations that made the Top Ten (alphabetically), **Clearwater, Fla. ... Fort Collins, Colo. ... Marquette, Mich. ... Pittsburgh, Pa. ... Portland, Ore. ... Santa Fe, N.M. ... Walnut Creek, Calif. ... Washington, DC** (called a "large amusement park for grown-ups. It's awash in museums, great restaurants, 40 performing arts venues ... major league sports" in a town smaller than Austin) ... and **Winston-Salem, NC.**

**It now seems likely Texans will be voting May 29<sup>th</sup> 2012 before any candidate has enough delegates to secure the GOP presidential nomination. So, how will the Texas vote shake out?**

Often in the past, the party nominees had already won enough delegates by the time Texans got around to holding their primary. At other times, candidates skipped Texas because they figured local guys **George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush** were prohibitive favorites to carry the Lone Star State. So the Texas voting was of little consequence. Not this year.

Texas has 155 delegates at stake, 2<sup>nd</sup> only to California where the Republicans vote June 5<sup>th</sup>. The Texas GOP primary May 29<sup>th</sup> should be a big deal. Assuming **George Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich** and **Ron Paul** are still battling it out, a lot of money, time and travel will be expended in Texas.

So, what can the candidates expect? Even though it falls on the Monday after Memorial Day and the turnout could be light, **“it will likely be the last nominating day that Mr. Romney will have to dread,”** predicts **Larry Sabato**, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. Sabato says “Texas is another heavily evangelical state – **in 2008, three of five Texas Republican primary voters were born-again Christians** – and Mr. Romney will struggle here.” He said Romney’s “one-time rival, Gov. **Rick Perry**, has endorsed Gingrich, and many Christian pastors in Texas favor Santorum.”

Sabato says Romney is not favored to carry the state. But no matter who wins most of the votes, that candidate will not get *all* the delegates. Texas is not a winner-take-all state. The delegates are divided proportionate to the percentage of votes received. **So the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place finishers could be within a handful of delegates of the winner.**

**Dr. Louis Overholster** is worried about how he will keep up with the 68 basketball teams playing for the national championship during March Madness. “And yet,” he says, “will all those teams wanting to win it all, they’ll probably decide a winner before the Republicans do in their primaries!”

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher