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Point Austin: The Way We Were

In Austin's politics of nostalgia, the truth is a frequent casualty

By Michael King

Well, the city's silly season – otherwise known as campaign time – is definitely in high gear.

While the Place 1 race (aka the Jason Meeker Campaign Comedy Circus) has featured the lion's share of looniness (see "[Place 1: Who's on First?](#)" by Lee Nichols), the other races are not without manufactured melodrama. Notably, last week the Place 3 race (Jennifer Kim vs. Randi Shade) featured the sort of time-warp two-step that so often marks Austin politics, as the Kim campaign attacked Shade for allegedly expressing a politically incorrect opinion ... about a film ... about an environmental episode ... that happened 15 years ago.

The backstory is as funny as the immediate argument. In February, Brian Rodgers, leader of the Stop Domain Subsidies charter amendment campaign (coming to a November election near you), had a conversation with newly announced candidate Shade, primarily about the proposed amendment, which Shade considers ill-advised. As it happened, Shade had recently seen *The Unforeseen*, Laura Dunn's documentary about the 1990s fight over development, Barton Springs, and the Save Our Springs Ordinance. The film came up in the conversation, and (as both people confirmed to me this week) Shade said it was a shame that some compromise couldn't have been worked out before the Legislature enacted House Bill 1704 (vetoed by Ann Richards in 1993, signed by George W. Bush in 1995), which essentially grandfathered every possible suburban development plat ever committed to napkin prior to the city's passage of SOS.

As each recalls it now, Shade's comments were on the order of the eminently inarguable and quite forgettable, "It's too bad things turned out as they did." But Rodgers thought the sentiment might be an indication of Shade possibly being naive or "too willing to compromise" on environmental matters, and reported the conversation that way to others, notably his colleagues on the Better Austin Today PAC. Two months later (April 17), at a Real Estate Council forum and in a subsequent press release, Kim sprung the conversation on Shade this way: "You told Brian Rodgers we should have negotiated SOS instead of passing SOS. Why do you feel this way?" A somewhat puzzled Shade rejected Kim's tendentious version of the conversation, adding that she was talking about the legislative action, not SOS, and regretting that somehow the city couldn't have persuaded the Lege to back down: "That the will of the citizens [of Austin] ... was basically taken by legislative process."

She Said What?

After this exchange, the Kim campaign circulated a letter signed by five "Austin environmentalists" (Gus Garcia, Bill Bunch, Brigid Shea, Robin Rather, and Ann Kitchen) denouncing Shade for, as they put it, telling

the forum, "She thought the City should have compromised with developers instead of passing the SOS ordinance." The first problem with that declaration is that even in their own attached "transcript" (see the whole letter online) of her forum statement, Shade said no such thing. Indeed, Kim's transparent attempt to trap Shade into taking such a position failed miserably. That didn't matter to these paragons of historical virtue, who claimed she said it anyway. In normal parlance, that's called a "lie," and it's a peculiarly incompetent one. But what's a little misrepresentation in the name of Barton Springs, especially at campaign time?

Shade insists that she supported SOS then, and she supports it now, and that she was regretting only the city's inability to stop HB 1704. Indeed, it took three years for lobbyist Dick Brown to ramrod the grandfathering law, finally succeeding only because of the 1994 Bush ascension. Other than Richards, in those years Austin essentially had no chance at the Capitol; but it is hardly an indication of environmental treason to express the 15-year-old wish that things had turned out differently. It's frankly absurd that former lawmakers Garcia and Kitchen should pretend to be "stunned" at Shade's innocuous reflections on "the importance of compromise." Shea and Rather have been read out of the environmental movement so often for impure thoughts you'd think they might know better by now. As for Bunch, he's on record multiple times dismissing the entire current council as environmentally regressive and corrupt, so who knows why he would sign a dishonest campaign letter on behalf of the Place 3 incumbent?

The Confidence Man

Also amusing in this little charade is the role played by *The Unforeseen*, Dunn's engaging, heartwarming, but thoroughly maudlin – and politically naive – history of the fight to save Barton Springs. It's hardly surprising that a viewer like Shade, coming fresh from that film, would express nostalgic regrets for what might have been. Dunn seems to have fallen completely in love with her main character (the only person granted a life history), Circle C developer Gary Bradley. Bradley is allowed to deliver a lachrymose eulogy for his mother (!) and is portrayed sympathetically as a Horatio Alger hero who tragically overreached.

That ain't just me talking; it was the opinion generally shared by the reviewers, most of whom don't know Bradley's real, hard-nosed, scorched-earth history. And it's apparently also shared by Shea, who, in an April 24 *Statesman* op-ed, blistered Dunn and the film for misrepresentations and omissions, particularly of Bradley's role in delaying the SOS election to enable even much more unregulated development in the watershed. "No one is asking for endless minutia," wrote Shea, "just the truth." (In the film, Bunch does describe Bradley as "a con man of the highest level," but it hardly makes a dent on Dunn.)

Having watched the film twice, I pretty much agree with Shea – that *The Unforeseen* is emotionally inspiring, but fundamentally misleading, about what actually happened (and is happening) to Barton Springs and Austin. Alas, the SOS Alliance has eagerly wrapped itself in the aura of this Terrence Malick-Robert Redford High Romantic environmentalism, using the film as a fundraiser and supposedly to educate the "unengaged, uninformed newcomers" to Austin that Bunch now blames on the SOS website – along with (roughly in this order) the City Council, the whole community, foreign wars, Wall Street, K Street, and *The Austin Chronicle* – for despoiling the Springs.

It does make one wonder: If *The Unforeseen* is wrong on Gary Bradley, but SOS actively promotes *The Unforeseen* as "powerful" and "amazing" and "challenging," does that mean Bunch and SOS are guilty of having incorrect thoughts about Barton Springs?

The Kim campaign better get on that, right away.

The Kim campaign letter from "Austin environmentalists" is available in sidebar below.

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