

Tuesday, March 22, 2005

## Candidates deal with landfill concerns in Northeast Austin

Council candidates outlined their positions on landfills and environmental protection at a forum held by the **Northeast Action Group**. While the questions from the audience focused primarily on the two landfills along Giles Road, the candidates also dealt with concerns regarding a privately run landfill near **Austin-Bergstrom International Airport**.

Local aviation groups had previously expressed concern to the City Council about that landfill, which they said was attracting birds, could pose a hazard to planes taking off or landing at **ABIA**. **Jay Carpenter** with the **Texas Aviation Association** reiterated those claims at the forum, asking candidates what they would do to close both the privately owned landfill and a separate city-owned facility near the airport.

**Council Member Betty Dunkerley**, who had previously dealt with the issue, urged continued monitoring of the situation and strict enforcement of the existing rules. "We have our staff out there monitoring. We're also asking them to monitor any reports that they get," she said. "My concern is that we continue that monitoring and take action if we do see any indication of problems." The question also played to the strengths of **Place 1** candidate **Lee Leffingwell**, who flew commercial planes for **Delta Airlines** before his retirement. "Birds near airports are a very big hazard," he agreed, graphically describing different scenarios for damage when birds collide with planes.

**Place 3** candidate **Gregg Knaupe** said problems at both the landfills near ABIA and those in northeast Travis County could be solved by strictly enforcing environmental regulations. He identified cost savings from turning over the management of the city-owned facility to a private company as one source of funds for a stepped-up enforcement program. "What I would like to see is that money earmarked for enforcement. The city has the authority to enforce these ordinances and levy fines. What we need to do is earmark that money for enforcing these ordinances and levying fines. Shut it down if it's not in compliance. I would like to see more enforcement out here as well," he said, referring to the two private landfills on the northeast side.

Those two landfills, operated by **BFI** and **Waste Management Inc. (WMI)**, dominated most of the discussion during the forum. "Will you oppose expansion of the northeast landfills if you're elected on the City Council?" asked Northeast Action Group organizer **Trek English**, pressing the candidates for a one-word answer. All of the candidates present in the **Place 1** and **Place 3** races answered "yes". But in **Place 4**, both **Dunkerley** and candidate **Wes Benedict** offered more nuanced explanations of their positions. "My concern is I want to make sure that we have something to do with our waste," said **Dunkerley**. "My issue is the city already takes all of its residential waste out to **TDS (Texas Disposal Systems)**. I don't know who's using those (the **BFI** and **WMI** landfills)," she further explained. **Benedict**, who also answered "maybe" to **English's** question, used his time to defend **Dunkerley's** position. "Maybe she knows she can't make promises she can't keep," he told the audience. "She's served on the Council and in the city for a while...I'd love to get up here and lie to everyone and say 'we're going to make your neighborhood perfect if I get elected,' but it's not realistic that everything could be made the way you want it to become," **Benedict** concluded. "I do think we can look at these situations. It does make sense to reduce landfills in this area so that we will have better development and not sprawl as much."

Although members of the Council and other elected officials could use the power of their office to have some influence over the two landfills, a final decision on expanding or closing the facilities will not be up to the City of Austin. The **Texas Commission on Environmental Quality**, a state agency, is responsible for permitting and regulating landfills. react