

Vote on county issues - Austin American-Statesman (TX) - October 17, 1997 - page A14

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Early voting in the Nov. 4 election begins tomorrow for Travis County voters, who will face a ballot loaded with 14 proposed state constitutional amendments and eight county bond propositions. Austin voters also will be asked to decide on a proposition that would regulate political fund raising and expenditures in city elections.

The county is seeking authority to issue \$96 million in general obligation bonds that would be repaid with tax money. The proposals are the "bread-and-butter" remnants of a much larger wish list pared down by a 25-member citizen advisory committee. The Austin American-Statesman believes all the proposed county bond items, except one, deserve voter support.

County commissioners, mindful that the county hasn't completed about \$17 million worth of projects approved in 1984, the last county election on roads and parks, decided to break with the past in this bond election. The county will be legally bound to put all interest earned on bond money toward paying off the bond debt rather than enlarging the budgets of the projects.

Furthermore, the bond order states that money earmarked for one precinct can't be transferred to another. If a project goes over budget, the county will either have to cut back the project or find the extra money somewhere else. Commissioners also have taken steps to ensure that all projects will be finished on budget and within five years. That should ease concerns that the county will not follow voters' wishes.

The proposals, and the American-Statesman editorial board's recommendations, are:

*No. 1 -- road and bridge improvements. "Yes." If this \$36 million package is approved, the county will reconstruct 27 miles of roads, widen six roads, eliminate a low-water crossing and replace seven bridges.

*No. 2 -- parkland acquisition and improvements. "Yes." A rapidly urbanizing Travis County badly needs parks. The package includes four items:

-- **Southeast Metro Park:** \$8,515,000 for purchase of 200 acres, and construction of five softball/baseball fields, four soccer fields, a concession stand, playground, picnic area, bathrooms and other facilities.

-- **Northeast Metro Park:** \$6,780,000 for purchase of 200 acres, and construction of at least eight soccer fields, concession stands, bathrooms, picnic areas and other facilities.

-- **Mansfield Dam Park:** \$13,480,000 to develop a boat ramp, dive area, group picnic area and a beach.

-- Webberville Park: \$335,000 to add sports lighting.

*No. 3 -- \$16,045,000 for expansion --of the Juvenile Justice Center. ``Yes." The bonds will enable the county to leverage a \$3.5 million grant from the state to construct 100 halfway house and secure beds for juveniles. The other portion is \$8.4 million for 24 secure beds , more space for court services and intake processing, plus space for a future 24-bed expansion.

*No. 4 -- MKT (MoKan) Hike and --Bike Trail, \$1.6 million. ``No." The county got the cart before the horse here. The trail could be constructed only if the state, which owns the abandoned railroad land in the northeastern part of the county, agrees to give the county a long-term lease or the county agreed to a state license to operate on the property. If the state chose not to lease, it could decide to use the property for some other purpose, such as light rail. All this should have been worked out before asking the voters to approve bonds.

*No. 5 -- Texas 130 Right-of---Way, \$4 million. ``Yes." The proposed SH 130 is a badly needed bypass of Interstate 35 in Eastern Travis County, and the \$4 million would be the county's initial investment in purchasing land for the future construction. The state has asked the county to invest a total of \$62 million in the project.

*No. 6 -- State Highway 45 Right- --of-Way, \$3,525,000. ``Yes." The money would be used to buy land to extend SH 45 (Loop 1) about 3.2 miles to the Hays County line to relieve neighborhoods along Brodie Lane from heavy pass-through traffic.

*No. 7, STAR Flight Facility, --\$2,035,000. ``Yes." The bonds would purchase a new STAR Flight helicopter maintenance facility. The existing facility is in rented space at Robert Mueller Airport and must be vacated.

*No. 8, Del Valle Jail Expansion, --\$13,700,000. ``Yes." The correctional complex is at capacity and the sale of the bonds will allow renovation of several buildings, better security and new housing.

TOMORROW: EDITORIAL BOARD REC OMMENDATIONS ON THE 14 STATE CON STITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PROPOSALS.

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