

Austin Swing strikes out with a number of political organizers

High-dollar campaign to steal new home base batting zero with new coalition

Will voters OK \$10 million for a pro baseball stadium?

Baseball's Deja Vu?

On Aug. 13, 1990, the *Round Rock Leader* reported that the Round Rock City Council had voted 6-1 to call a bond election for Sept. 8 of that year. Voters were asked for authority to issue bonds for \$7 million to finance a multi-purpose stadium and host a minor league baseball team. The ordinance stipulated that the council was prohibited from issuing bonds until a written agreement had been entered into between the city and the professional baseball team that would use the stadium. The Class AA Texas League had already said it would award an expansion franchise to Round Rock if the voters approved the bonds. City officials stressed the stadium would be a multi-use facility capable of hosting concerts, trade shows and possibly other sports events. Then-mayor Mike Robinson envisioned the stadium as a hub for a water theme park similar to the Schlitterbahn in New Braunfels, a PGA Family Golf Center, and mini-convention center. On election day, fifteen percent of Round Rock voters turned out—almost twice the usual 8 percent, assistant city manager Joanne Land tells *In Fact*. She says the bonds were defeated with 2,165 voting no (63 percent), and 1,218 voting yes.

Baseball may be right up there with mom and apple pie, but it's going to bomb at the ballot box Oct. 7, if an unlikely coalition of organizations gets its way. These groups don't have big bucks for the media campaign being waged by **Supporters of the Park on the Colorado**. What they do have is a bunch of veteran activists spoiling for a fight. They've also got the "hottest list in town," the names and phone numbers of the 20,000 registered voters who signed petitions for **Save Austin From Extravagance**. SAFE forced the election and then disbanded. Its organizer, former council member **Bob Larson**, has pledged to remain neutral on whether voters should approve \$10 million for the city's share of the cost of a stadium.

The overriding theme among opposition groups interviewed by *In Fact* is that the city shouldn't be spending money on a stadium when it's got so many unmet needs for basic city services. Spearheading the resistance is a new group calling itself **Priorities First!**. The owner of video production company **JMH Communications**, **Jack Haden**, took the leadership role by default, after politicians side-stepped. **Priorities First!** counts among its leaders **Jeff Heckler**, a member of the **State Democratic Party's** executive committee. **El Concilio**, an umbrella organization of eight Mexican-American neighborhood associations from East and Southeast Austin, will work against the bonds. **Gavino Fernandez Jr.** says Mexican-American neighborhoods will be directly hurt by the traffic and noise the stadium would bring, and are especially fearful of concert crowds that might number up to 30,000 people. "It's the boat races all over again," says Fernandez, recalling the unmuffled racing engines that used to blast East Austin with noise during drag boat races on Town Lake. Also joining the fray will be **Kirk Mitchell**, president of the **Save Our Springs Legal Defense Fund**. He's forming a new group called the **Austin Private Enterprise Committee**. "I'm going to try to assemble like-minded people who are fed up with private enterprise feeding at the public trough," says Mitchell. The fledgling **Patriot Party**, a group of about 500 Texans who spun off from **Ross Perot's United We Stand**, will be in the trenches. **Linda Curtis** says Patriot Party volunteers will be pounding the pavement through Sept. 18 to urge a 'no' vote, and then they'll hit the phones to help call the 20,000 folks who signed the SAFE petition. A political action committee headed by a Republican Party consultant, **Todd Smith**, stands ready to commit cash if needed. He heads a political action committee called **Taxpayers Defense Fund**, which ponied up the \$6,000 for SAFE's radio commercials. The PAC claims credit, too, for helping to defeat bonds for the **Lewisville Arena** in February. Smith says the PAC spent \$25,000 to stop the use of tax funds to build a basketball arena. "We're philosophically opposed to using tax dollars to fund a private venture," Smith says.

With the opposition pitching spitballs, a new stadium appears in doubt for the **Austin Swing**, a moniker the AAA league **Phoenix Firebirds** will take if they win voter approval and move to Austin. "We're very much the underdog in this election," says **Joe Matlock**, former chief executive officer of **Franklin Federal Bancorp**, who is the treasurer for **Supporters of the Park on the Colorado**. ❖