

Hotshot young lawyer puts heat on Reynolds in bid for mayor's job

Plaintiff's trial lawyer puts his case to voters for verdict

Watson on Issues

Cut Capital Metro's sales tax?:
Leave it alone for now.

How would you keep Austin from becoming a nonattainment city for air quality?: We have to have a first-class transportation system. It's important to get people out of cars. Austin needs to fully fund the air-quality study already underway.

Independent board of governance for electric utility?: "I support it." Caveats: Protect employees, and prevent the utility's sale.

Downtown tax increment financing district?: Supports it. "Downtown ought to be the living room for this entire community."

Waller Creek tunnel (\$18 million flood control project to reclaim downtown land from floodplain): Supports it. But is not sure we can afford it immediately.

Support mandatory bicycle helmet law?: Yes.

Opinion of Freeport-McMoRan's record in Austin?: "The way they have gone about doing some of their business in Austin I don't think has played positively in where this city ultimately wants to be. And that includes political tactics; that includes legislative tactics."

What has Watson supported in the past?: Insurance benefits for unmarried domestic partners. He backed both Mary Arnold and Jackie Goodman in council races.

Class president and state debating champ in high school. *Magna cum laude* graduate in political science. Head of the class at law school, and editor-in-chief of the *Baylor Law Review*. President of the **Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA)**. Chairman of the **Texas Air Control Board (TACB)**. Chairman of the **Travis County Democratic Party**. At age 38, **Kirk Watson** of the Austin law firm **Whitehurst Harkness Watson et al** is a man who had his ticket to success punched in all the right places. He's never been anything but a winner. He has even conquered cancer. Now the five-foot-seven contender to be Austin's next mayor steps into the ring against heavyweight **Ronney Reynolds**, 48, the incumbent council member who has openly courted support for his bid to move to the center of the council dais. "The concept of debating him and having my neck hurt at the end of those debates is not something I relish," Watson jokingly says of Reynolds. "I may have to come up with a platform, literally." For now, Reynolds will say only that he will announce his future political plans in September. No doubt others will enter the race to succeed **Bruce Todd**, who has chosen not to seek another term. With less than eight months left before early voting begins for the May 3 election, serious challengers for this high office had best be gathering supporters. The only other trial balloon in the air now is that of attorney **Tom Forbes** (*In Fact* No. 49).

Like many aspiring politicians, Watson mouths the rhetoric of needing to heal the rifts that divide Austin's political players into warring camps. "Politics doesn't have to be a blood sport," he says. Watson talks about moving past these divisions to build both community and consensus. Whether Watson can stay on the idealistic high road in the heat of a down-to-the-wire mayoral battle remains to be seen, but he has a history of tackling tough issues by building teams. As TYLA president, he formed an environmental committee and brought in young attorneys who had scoffed at bar membership. As TACB chairman, on the heels of the East Austin battle to close down a fuel farm, Watson formed an **Environmental Equity and Justice Task Force** to address environmental racism. He rejects the political strategy of labeling opponents, he says, and claims he will reach out to embrace anyone who is willing to put aside divisions and move the city forward. As chairman of Travis County Democratic Party, Watson bearded the lion in its den by addressing the **Capital City Christian Coalition**, and appearing on their radio talk show. As someone who grew up in the **Church of Christ** and was educated at **Baylor University**, Watson was at ease in the **Park Hills Baptist Church**, where he spoke to the coalition about a year ago. "I pointed over to the piano in the corner, and pointed out that the scripture the Church of Christ believes says you don't use instrumental music...But no one can question the righteousness of someone who chooses to worship by having instrumental music, just as no one can question the righteousness of feeling of those who believe you're supposed to make music in your heart," he says. "We can't even agree on that scripture...So how can we possibly be expected to agree on every public policy issue?" **Elaine Hucklebridge**, who was the coalition chairwoman and lobbyist at the time, recalls

CONTINUED PAGE 2

Watson vs. Reynolds

Those who know council member Ronney Reynolds and know Kirk Watson see the race this way:

Don Martin, who ran Bruce Todd's mayoral campaigns in '91 & '94: "I think Kirk's going to be a very strong, formidable candidate. With his strong Democratic Party background, he brings in folks not active in local politics. He obviously appeals strongly to the environmental faction, and has strong appeal to the downtown business community...Ronney campaigned so long trying to ward off an opponent. Kirk will be extremely hard to beat. Ronney won't take it laying down. There's no way he'll back off running."

Jeff Crosby of Emory Young & Associates, which is being considered as Watson's political consultant: "Ronney should be a little concerned that Kirk has reached out to business leaders and they seem to be ready to get on board. It should be worrisome that Kirk can reach into his world and take a little bit of that away."

Former mayor Lee Cooke, who won three terms on the council and a term as mayor, never defeated: "Kirk will be middle of the road to the left, Ronney will be middle of the road to the right. Both will be trying to capture the middle...The business community is looking for someone other than Ronney...They're telling Ronney they support him, but they're really looking for someone else."

Mark Yznaga, who consulted for Daryl Slusher and Beverly Griffith in 1996 council races: On Watson: "He's demonstrated a balanced environmental interest, because he understands we need business in this city. I think he's going to be the next mayor...Ronney has a tremendous amount of baggage...Ronney needs to show he cares about the environment."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the speech Watson gave. "I was impressed," she says. "He seemed like a sincere advocate for his position." While Watson impressed this conservative group, he has a long way to go before he wins the support of Austin's conservative business community. Yes, Watson is on the executive committee of the **Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce**, and that will help. He is also a plaintiff's trial attorney, a fact that worries some people, such as attorney and former **Austin Independent School Board** president **Ed Small**, who is supporting Reynolds. "I think we need more business oriented candidates," Small tells *In Fact*. On the other hand, Watson has a clear edge over Reynolds with the environmental community that boosted all three winners in the 1996 council races. **Neil Carman**, clean air program director for the **Lone Star Chapter** of the **Sierra Club**, was working for the TACB when Watson was appointed chairman by gov. **Ann Richards** in October 1991. Carman was worried. He had been deposed by Watson in a 1982 lawsuit in which the young hotshot attorney helped represent **Permian Oil Co.** Carman was soon converted, however. Watson's leadership snapped the board out of its rubber-stamp lethargy and moved the agency into the forefront. "Kirk was visionary," Carman says, netting him a special service award from the Sierra Club in 1994. Watson's stint at the TACB ended in August 1993, after he had helped blueprint the successor agency, the **Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission**.

Watson has few detractors, and few obstacles to hurdle on the way to winning the mayor's post. A major challenge is that Watson will wage his first-ever campaign against a formidable opponent, Reynolds. Watson's debating skills are excellent but he has not been tested in the heat of political battle, where decisions must be both decisive and quick. Secondly, Watson—however well known he is in Democratic Party circles—is virtually unknown to the mass of Austin's voters. This can be cured with enough money to spend on television, radio and direct mail. In that regard, Watson should have no difficulty. Although he is far from the deadline to file a financial disclosure to indicate his holdings, his personal wealth is evident in the 5,000-square-foot house he owns on Woodlawn Boulevard, which is valued on the tax rolls at more than \$738,000. As a trial lawyer, he has a statewide network of wealthy allies who have demonstrated their eagerness to pump money into a friend's campaign. Watson has not selected his political consultants yet. More than anything, picking the right consultants would show he's savvy about how to build a winning team, while denying Reynolds any advantage. One thing he won't do, he says, is attack Reynolds. The only criticism of Reynolds that *In Fact* could get out of Watson was fairly gentle, considering the stakes. "One of the difficulties we have, and that Ron represents, is kind of the old way we've been doing things, and the polarization that occurs with the way we've been doing things," he says—before adding a bucket of qualifiers about how he likes Reynolds, and is not critical of him. "I think I can win this race any number of ways," Watson says. "But I don't want to win it and not be able to make a difference in governing...If at the end of it they say, 'Boy, didn't he run a naive, losing campaign,' all that means is I'll have to find other avenues for community service, and trying to build community." ❄

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