

JANA BIRCHUM

O Mayor,

Where Art Thou?

by Ken Martin

"People tell you, 'Kirk, if you're planning on doing this (running for mayor) as a stepping stone, you're out of your mind.' I'm not. If I were going to pick and choose for future personal political gain, you're right, this would not be the place to pick to be."

**—Kirk Watson,
exclusive interview for mayoral candidacy,
August 15, 1996**

Kirk Watson said he didn't pick the Austin mayor's office as a political stepping stone for higher office, but the reality of the situation is that now he is eyeing higher office. And why not? As mayor, he has gained national press coverage for Austin's achievements as a rising high-tech star (nevermind that the luster has dimmed a bit of late). He has traveled abroad to promote foreign trade. He has been a hard-charger who set an incredibly fast pace in tackling the objectives he targeted. As a candidate, Watson has demonstrated that he can gather financial support from far and wide. In his first bid for the mayor's office in 1997, he raised \$750,000, of which some \$200,000 came in big chunks from out-of-town

lawyers—and that was without a runoff, as opponent Ronney Reynolds tossed in the towel. While this is only a fraction of what it takes to run a strong race statewide, no one doubts that Watson can raise what's needed.

While Kirk Watson has been publicly denying that he would resign as mayor of Austin to run for higher office, the rumors of his departure have been running rampant. I may have played a small part in starting the speculation. Four months before the council election in which he won another term, in a January 4, 2000, taping of *Austin at Issue*, the local public affairs television show on KLRU hosted by Tom Spencer, I asked the mayor: "Will you promise the people of Austin that if you are reelected you will finish your second term as mayor?"

Watson said that he could not make that guarantee. Which of course begs the question of why he bothered to run for another mayoral term at all unless he wanted to use it as a springboard for higher office.

My question was couched in the possibility that if Al Gore won the White House, Watson could be in line for an appointed office in the new administration. But it's always been obvious that Watson possesses the ambition, the talent, the intelligence, the gift of gab, and the ability to drum up financial support—in sum, everything needed to win elective office beyond the City of Austin.

The *Austin Chronicle* heightened spec-

ulation about Watson's possible run for higher office with a big package of articles published last September 29. More recently, the *Chronicle* has been adding fuel to the fires of anticipation by occasionally publishing what it calls the "Mayor-o-Meter," airing the latest gossip from the rumor mill. (The none-too-happy mayor complains that nobody from the *Chronicle* ever calls in connection with the Mayor-o-Meter pieces.)

More amusing to Watson is that KLRU aired another segment of *Austin at Issue* April 6 and April 8, a show we participants jokingly called "Name That Mayor." In an interview just before the show was taped, Watson told *The Good Life*, "I think it's hilarious to have a show talking about this, when there are no plans."

What the mayor *really* means is that he has made no decision about his political future or, if he has decided, he is not ready to announce. There are good reasons for taking this stance. The political landscape is changing rapidly while the Texas Legislature is in session. In addition, to become a candidate for higher office with more than a

year left on his term, Watson would have to vacate the mayor's office. But that raises the question: Does Watson need the mayoral springboard for higher office? Especially now that the high-tech downturn may have taken some of the snap out of it? Does Watson think he can steal second base without getting off first?

The fact remains that Watson has not ruled out a bid for higher office. "Being mayor has confirmed for me that I really love public service," he says. "The concept that I might continue to do public service, maybe in a different venue, is worth looking at." But, he adds, "I have not made my decision."

While it's unclear whether Watson will be drawn to run for higher office in 2002, observers have noted Watson doesn't seem to be enjoying the mayor's job much. "That's what life's like in city politics," notes Mayor Pro Tem Jackie Goodman. "These are not fun jobs." Especially when so-called core constituents speak out against Watson's initiatives such as securing long-range water supplies, protecting water quality through agreements with developers, and getting big businesses to locate downtown instead of over the aquifer.

Officially, Watson is in a holding pattern for now—but he can't wait much longer and expect to do well in a race for higher office. For one thing, opposing candidates who start earlier may siphon off support for Watson. His delay emboldens

others who might not run if the mayor were a candidate for a certain office. In addition, the filing deadline for the state primary election is January 2, 2002—just eight months away—and the primary election itself is less than a year away. Time's wasting for anyone who is going to stump the big state of Texas. "The fact is, once we get past another month or so, the moving and jockeying to find out who's a real candidate, as opposed to who's just considering it, will get really intense," says Austin-based political consultant Bill Emory of Emory and Young, a firm that helped run statewide political races for Democrats Ann Richards and John Sharp.

Watson has been heavily courted to help win back some of the offices that are now totally dominated by Republicans. Jackie Goodman, long active in Democratic Party politics, says, "Everybody has known since last summer that the Texas Democratic Party thought Kirk would be a star to pin hopes on for a statewide race."

Offices that Watson could be considering include the US Senate seat held by Phil

Gramm—especially if Gramm decides to step down and not seek a fourth term in 2002. However, Gramm spokesman Don Stewart tells *The Good Life* that Gramm has decided to run for another term.

Running against Gramm, who chairs the Senate Banking Committee and also sits on the Senate Budget Committee and Senate Finance Committee, would be—to say the least—an uphill battle. Watson would have to get up to speed on national and international issues that are far different from the more familiar state issues. Plus, Bill Emory notes, “Gramm has proved he’s meaner than a snake, and tougher than a boot.”

A major factor in who Democrats might field against Gramm, if anyone, depends on the outcome of redistricting, Emory says. A capable US representative whose district is cut in such a way that reelection seems unlikely might just decide to take on Gramm, and would have a better shot than an upstart mayor who is unfamiliar with federal turf.

What about a congressional seat for the mayor? Travis County is, after all, likely to be carved into two districts for US representatives. But one of those seats may be jammed with Republicans. Incumbent Lloyd Doggett, assuming he doesn’t decide to seek a rematch with Phil Gramm, who beat Doggett in 1984 to win the Senate seat, will own into perpetuity the district that favors Democrats.

Exactly how redistricting will turn out, and with it the ramifications for the US senatorial and US congressional races, won’t be known much before the legislative ses-

sion ends May 28.

People familiar with what’s going on inside the Texas Democratic Party say that a slate of candidates is being planned to take on the GOP, starting with A.R. “Tony” Sanchez Jr. of Laredo for governor, former State Comptroller John Sharp for lieutenant governor, and Austin Mayor Kirk Watson for attorney general.

Sharp is the best known and is proven performer. In 1998—the year that every Democrat running for statewide office was defeated—Sharp came within a hair of beating Rick Perry for the lieutenant governor’s post, taking 48.19 percent of the votes to Perry’s 50.14 percent. (Libertarian Anthony Garcia snagged 1.75 percent of the votes.)

Sanchez serves on the board of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and formerly served on the boards of both the National Council of La Raza and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Sanchez is considered a strong candidate for Democrats, despite the fact that he donated more than \$320,000 to the presidential campaign of Governor George W. Bush. Sharp raved about Sanchez in an article published in July 2000 by the *San Antonio Express-News*, saying, “I know he’s going to run and become one of the best governors we ever had.”

Sanchez, who in 1997 was appointed by Governor Bush to a six-year term on the University of Texas Board of Regents, rocked his own political boat when a report prepared by Sanchez’ hired private investigators targeted Secretary of State Henry Cuellar, also a Laredo Democrat. The report called into question Cuellar’s sexual

orientation and sexual conduct. Recent press accounts suggest that Sanchez is trying to make amends with Cuellar. Failure to do so could trip land mines in the Rio Grande Valley and blow off chunks of



Beverly Griffith

support for a Sanchez gubernatorial bid.

Jeff Heckler, a former member of the State Democratic Executive Committee, says the Cuellar flap could hurt not only Sanchez but other Democrats running for state office; their fortunes could rise or fall with Sanchez, whose wealth makes him the “money horse” for the slate. Sanchez’ holdings include Sanchez Oil and Gas Corporation and International Bancshares Corporation. “Kirk Watson must wade through that, and defend himself for being a trial

lawyer and the mayor of liberal Austin,” Heckler says.

Heck, with Tony Sanchez raising the specter of being for Democrats what oil man Clayton Williams was for Republicans in 1990 (Williams’ loose lips sunk the GOP ship, giving Ann Richards the governor’s mansion) maybe Kirk Watson ought to look at running for governor himself instead of tying his fortunes to a political novice.

If Watson plugs into the Democratic Party’s slate as a candidate for attorney general, he’s got vast experience as a trial attorney to draw upon. But Cornyn’s considered no pushover. To win the AG’s office in 1998, Cornyn trounced his Democratic opponent, former AG Jim Mattox, by 54 percent to 44 percent. Before that, Cornyn served seven years on the Texas Supreme Court, winning reelection to a second term on the high court in 1996. Cornyn’s influence within the GOP reaches all the way to the White House, as he served as a member of the Bush-Cheney Transition Advisory Committee.

Travis County Republican Party Chair Alan Sager, who should be feeling pretty spunky after recently raising a reported \$240,000 at an event honoring presidential aide Karl Rove, says, “I relish Kirk Watson running for higher office. We just can’t wait for the rest of the state to find out what he did to Austin.” Sager lists traffic, crime, inadequate police, and unfinished buildings downtown (think Intel) as issues that Republicans might use against Watson.

Watson told *The Good Life* on April 6 that indeed there has been talk of a Democratic Party slate, and a number of potential candidates have been exploring the idea.

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"But for there to be a slate, people have to make a personal decision that they will run," Watson said. "I will keep my options open and continue to look at it."

Over the years Watson has repeatedly mentioned that he is a cancer survivor, and he alluded to it again in his latest interview with *The Good Life*. "Because I was supposed to be dead a couple of times over, I will evaluate things," he said, but added that he will do so "in a thoughtful way and know every angle."

"I will make my decision based on what's best for my family, me, and the citizens I want to serve," he says. "It will be on my time frame."

A lot of people wish that Watson would abandon loftier ambitions for now and focus on finishing the second term that he won just a year ago, and which doesn't end until June 15, 2003.

Downtown real estate developer Perry Lorenz (who has a financial interest in *The Good Life*), says of Watson, "He's been the best mayor we've had—and I've been here since 1966. I think times are getting tough and I really wish he'd stick it out. A lot of us will be very disappointed if he quits, especially now that we're on the slippery slope of economic uncertainty. We need him now more than ever."

The Downtown Austin Alliance is also praying that Watson doesn't pull up stakes, but the DAA has started preparing for the day when the mayor and council may not be as fond of providing financial incentives for downtown development. The *Austin Business Journal* on March 30 reported the DAA is laying groundwork to form an economic development corporation for the Central Business District. "Our development and redevelopment of downtown and other areas doesn't begin and end with a certain mayor's or council's term, but rather it is an ongoing effort," DAA Executive Director Charlie Betts told the *Journal*. "The nature of some of these things is more longer-term than short, and you'd like not to always be subject to a 4-3 vote, which you might not come out on the long end of."

Meanwhile, insiders say that private interests accustomed to getting tens of millions of dollars in benefits for Smart Growth incentives "are begging" Watson to stay and finish his term.

Watson is being pulled like taffy by the Texas Democratic Party and those who wish he'd stay put, not to mention his own

ambition and family concerns. He has a diabetic son and his wife, Liz, is "not a huge lover of political life, thought gracious and supportive," says Watson's campaign fund-raiser, Barbara Rush. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Watson may abandon the mayor's office on short notice.

Fast and furious campaign to succeed Watson

In the last major face-off for mayor—Watson against incumbent Council Member Ronney Reynolds—both men spent upwards of a year dialing for dollars, begging for support, and arguing the issues. Four months before the election was held, Watson had raised \$273,000 and Reynolds had raked up \$150,000. By the time the general election was held in May 1997, Watson had raised \$750,000 and Reynolds had \$376,000, a total of more than \$1.1 million. That's the kind of money that it takes to run a high-profile mayoral campaign that can hire consultants and pollsters and reach voters through expensive television ads, radio ads, direct mail, yard signs, and other resources for volunteers.

Whoever runs for mayor following Watson's resignation must compete in a special election for which the campaign will last just two to four months.

The Texas Election Code, the Austin City Charter, and a bit of discretion held by the Austin City Council will collectively govern the timing of any special election for a mayor to succeed Watson. The chain of events would start with the mayor's resignation. Even if the resignation is to be effective at a later date, the vacancy is automatically created and would occur on the "date the resignation is accepted by the City Council or eight days after the resignation is filed, whichever is earlier," says Elizabeth Hanshaw, director of the Secretary of State's Legal Division.

The special election to fill the unexpired portion of the mayor's term "should

be called as soon as practicable after the vacancy occurs," says Assistant City Attorney John Steiner. The election must be held on the next uniform election date specified in state law that falls at least thirty days after the date the vacancy occurs, Hanshaw says. She says the upcoming uniform election dates are August 11, November 6, and January 19. While you can tie yourself in knots with various readings of the election laws and the City Charter, Steiner says,

"to boil it down, the city would go with the nearest uniform election date that's doable."

Doable means giving City Clerk Shirley Brown enough time to organize the election by hiring election judges, securing polling places, printing ballots, getting vote-tabulating machines reprogrammed, and obtaining approval of polling places from the US Department of Justice. "Ideally, we

would get sixty days as a minimum, but if someone says, 'You've got to do it (sooner),' we'd do it," Brown says, adding, "There's an awful lot beyond our control."

The fact is that the mayor—if he chose to do so—could tilt the playing field. Watson could whisper into a favored successor's ear the date on which he will resign, bestowing a strategic advantage in planning. Watson could give the best chance to a current or former council member by timing his resignation so that the campaign would be brief and a political newcomer's ability to establish name recognition would be diminished. For example, if the mayor were to submit his resignation shortly after the legislative session ends, say around June 1, that would trigger a special election on August 11, meaning that a candidate would have a maximum of ten weeks to campaign.

Current council members who become mayoral candidates with more than a year left on their terms would have to resign to run for mayor. The terms of Jackie Good-

man, Beverly Griffith, and Daryl Slusher all expire June 15, 2002. If they were to wait and become a mayoral candidate after June 15, 2001, resignation would not be required. The terms of Council Members Raul Alvarez, Danny Thomas, and Will Wynn expire June 15, 2003. Any of them who want to run in a special election for mayor would have to resign.

If the mayor were to submit his resignation between June 15 and June 30, the city attorney and city clerk may argue that it would be impossible to prepare for an August 11 election, and persuade the City Council to set the special election for November 6. That would give mayoral candidates about four months to campaign.

While it's possible the mayor would resign even later, it seems unlikely he would wait until the fall and have too little time to prepare for the primary. Former Council Member Gus Garcia says he's heard the mayor will announce "after June." Jackie Goodman says the latest word is that Watson might announce for higher office "in August."

To be successful in a statewide race, says political consultant Todd Main—who last year was national director for Ralph Nader's presidential campaign—there must be enough money to buy television ads in all major Texas markets. Starting late means Watson would run into the issue of what political consultant Bill Emory calls "velocity of money," meaning how much and how fast a candidate has to raise moolah. "The later you get in, the higher the velocity," he says.

The people who would be mayor

Council Members Jackie Goodman, Beverly Griffith and Daryl Slusher, and former colleague Gus Garcia, are all interested in possibly running for mayor, as are Robin Rather, former chair of the Save Our Springs Alliance (SOSA); and, if Rather runs, possibly current SOSA Chair Mark Tschurr. None of them profess to know whether Watson will step down to run for higher office, but all are contemplating the what-ifs.

Other people who have been bandied about as possible mayoral candidates include Council Member Will Wynn; Jim Skaggs, the former Tracor CEO who headed Reclaim Our Allocated Dollars, which defeated the light-rail referendum last November; and Lynn Sherman, executive manager of governmental affairs and



Mayor Pro Tem Jackie Goodman

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community relations for the Lower Colorado River Authority. Wynn says, "I got caught up in the same speculation as everyone else over the holidays. I should have recognized that everyone needed to take a cold shower." Will Wynn run? "I hardly ever say never but it's unlikely," says Wynn. Skaggs says, "I'm not interested. I'm really not...I'd love to help Austin with its transportation needs, but I don't want to get into that broader scope." Sherman, who is helping raise two sets of twin girls, the youngest of which are eight months old, says, "I have a constituency at home I need to focus on." Sherman says his name probably got into press accounts because he had left town on vacation around the end of January, when both the *Statesman* and *Chronicle* called on the same day. "I wasn't there to disabuse the idea," he says.

Gus Garcia—A retired certified public accountant, Garcia is by far the most seasoned of all the known potential mayoral candidates. *The Good Life* chronicled Garcia's long history of public service in the January 2000 cover story, which closed, incidentally, with Garcia's admission that he might someday run for mayor. In 1972 Garcia was elected to the board of the Austin Independent School



Robin Rather

District, where he served six years and helped to desegregate Austin schools and establish Austin Community College. Garcia was elected to the Austin City Council in 1991 and retired undefeated in June 2000. As a council member Garcia championed increased city contracts for women- and minority-owned businesses and pushed successfully for the construction of Plaza Saltillo and the Mexican-American cultural arts center. He chaired the council's Telecommunications Committee, helping to guide the city through tough negotiations for renewal of Austin CableVision's franchise (now Time Warner Cable).

Garcia says that since retiring from the City Council he has taken care of some nagging health problems, lost about fifteen pounds, and feels great for a man of sixty-seven. Besides traveling, Garcia has been doing a bit of lobbying at the Texas Legislature on behalf of Environmental Defense (formerly Environmental Defense Fund), for which his compensation has been less than \$10,000, according to the Texas Ethics Commission.

"I'm looking at it," Garcia says of the possible mayoral election. "I haven't set a date to decide because I'm having a hell of a good time in retirement."

"Gus is a great consensus candidate," says political consultant Mike Blizzard of Grassroots Solutions. "He's one of the few people in this town with the stature to walk in and be *the* candidate for mayor." Garcia as mayoral candidate solves a lot of problems, Blizzard says, because otherwise a public battle between Goodman, Griffith,

Slusher, and Rather would force supporters to make uncomfortable choices. That might make it possible for a conservative candidate to sneak past a squabbling pack of progressive-liberals to win the mayor's job.

The biggest drawback to Garcia's candidacy is whether the city needs—or voters want—a caretaker mayor. "I could not do what Kirk does," Garcia says. "Kirk is a tornado. He gets in front of so many issues." Garcia adds, "Nobody's going to do what Kirk has done. Those guys are few and far between." But then, Austin's economy is not what it was a short time ago, either. Garcia notes that the reduced rate of growth in sales-tax revenue is putting a crimp on the city budget. "It ain't the dynamic, dot-com, full-speed-ahead economy of twelve months ago," Garcia says.

"The mayor will have to structure things when the economy is not so hot."

If he ran for mayor, Garcia says his focus would in part be where he started his political career—AISD—with emphasis on educating minority children, who make up the majority of students in the district.

If Garcia were to fill Watson's unexpired term he would sixty-nine when it ends in June 2003. But it would

be a fitting footnote to a long and honorable political career to go down in history as Austin's first Hispanic mayor.

Jackie Goodman—The mayor pro tem says she would be relieved if Garcia ran. "I've taken myself out of the running if Gus does it." If Garcia were mayor, Goodman says, he would likely support the projects she wants to focus on for the next two years, including urban and neighborhood planning; long-term policies for medical care and medical facilities; and the environment, especially air quality. "Not only is Gus' heart in the right place, but he has the intelligence and experience to make things happen that need to happen."

While Goodman, who turns fifty-five this month, might like to stay off the center of the council dais for now, she could be interested in succeeding Watson if Garcia opts not to run. First elected in 1993, Goodman is in her third term and has been on the council eight years, the longest of any current council member. She chaired the committee that formed the Community Action Network, in effect a type of metropolitan government with respect to assessing needs and focusing resources for social services. A former president of the Save Barton Creek Association, she has been a strong supporter of environmental issues, though not always appreciated by the Save Our Springs Alliance, such as when she (and all council members except Daryl Slusher) supported variances to the Save Our Springs Ordinance for the Forum Planned Unit Development, allowing mitigation of environmental impacts by setting

aside off-site land in perpetuity. As lead sponsor of the Citizens Planning Committee, Goodman is the mother of planning efforts that are mapping out citizen-driven visions for Austin neighborhoods, as well as streamlining Austin's development process. Goodman enjoyed strong support from the business community in past elections as well.

On the other hand, Goodman's not anxious to run for mayor, at least not before 2003. "I think it would be fine to have Kirk serve his term as mayor," she says. "I'd be very happy with him as mayor till 2003."

Beverly Griffith—A longtime advocate of open space before winning election to the council in 1996, Griffith had served more than ten years on the city's Parks Board, three as chair. She's the person most responsible for the city's acquisition of the 1,047-acre Barton Creek Wilderness Park and for founding the Austin Parks Foundation. She serves on the national board of the Trust for Public Land. She served five years as bank vice president of NCNB. She is a partner in Griffith Properties. Griffith is used to running short campaigns. When she first ran for council in 1996, she did not declare her candidacy until just two months before the election. That didn't stop her from beating business-backed Rick Wheeler by a healthy seven percent in a runoff.

In her first term, Griffith teamed with Gus Garcia to get funding for a Social Fabric Initiative, which provided programs that reduced juvenile crime, and to sponsor bonds for Destination Parks and Greenways.

Griffith, sixty-two, has been the biggest detractor of some of Kirk Watson's initiatives. For example, she didn't agree to vote for incentives for Computer Sciences Corporation to build a new headquarters downtown until she wrung out some last-minute concessions on how much the city might pay for enhancing traffic flow in and out of CSC's underground garages. Last year, Griffith created havoc over the mayor's transportation bonds when she tried to add bonds for affordable housing and parks acquisition. While Griffith lost that battle, some suspect it was a political setup to get some council members (and possible future mayoral opponents) on record as opposing bonds for affordable housing and parks acquisition.

Griffith won't say whether she will or she won't run for mayor. What she will say is that she wants to focus on three components of quality of life: a solid economy, a beautiful, healthy environment, and social equity. "I'm pro growth—don't let anybody tell you different," Griffith says. "I embrace the future. I embrace change with continuity that protects the quality of life and the essence of Austin."

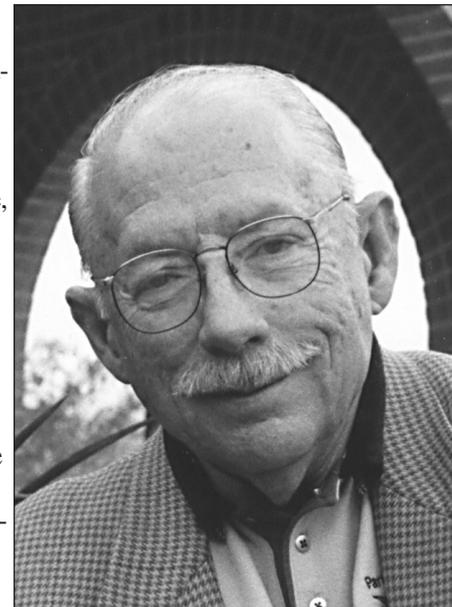
If there should be a special election for

mayor, Griffith says, she will gather facts and make a decision about a possible candidacy. Asked if she would run against Gus Garcia, Griffith hedges, saying, "I don't know if his running is a fact or not a fact. If it's a fact, I would have to plug it into the equation."

Daryl Slusher—Now forty-seven years of age, Slusher was politics editor of the *Austin Chronicle* when he ran for mayor in 1994 against incumbent Bruce Todd, and he came within 1,339 votes of unseating him in a runoff. The fact that Slusher forced a runoff was a phenomenal achievement for a shoestring campaigner running against an entrenched incumbent who was a certified public accountant with broad support in the business community. Slusher was revered among environmentalists and neighborhood activists for his poison-pen coverage of city government's foibles.

Some people think Slusher wouldn't mind taking another run at it, but Slusher's not publicly saying he will or he won't run in the wake of Watson's resignation. "I'm concentrating on the term to which I was reelected," Slusher tells *The Good Life*.

In 1996, Slusher was able to capitalize on his *Chronicle* reputation to win a tough first council race in a runoff with establishment candidate Jeff Hart, an attorney. Since Kirk Watson won the mayor's job in 1997, Slusher has been Watson's staunch ally



Gus Garcia

on most issues and, as a result, the grassroots support Slusher enjoyed in the past may have eroded. Save Our Springs Alliance Chair Mark Tschurr, for example, is dismayed over Slusher's support of the Bradley agreement and subsidies for high-tech companies to build downtown.

Political consultant Mike Blizzard, who served as campaign manager for Slusher's reelection in 1999 and as field supervisor for Slusher's campaign in 1996, is a member of the Save Our Springs Political Action Committee. Blizzard recalls that in Slusher's 1996 council campaign, the slogan for which was "Basics Not Boondoggles," Slusher argued that downtown was revitalizing itself pretty well without subsidies, as in the warehouse district. Now, Blizzard says, city policy has "gone from subsidizing lily white suburbs for the wealthy to subsidizing lily white condos for the wealthy."

Slusher over the years moved to the center politically and in 1999 even captured a majority of votes in the West Austin precinct that casts its votes at Casis Elementary—a feat that political consultant David Butts said would have been unbelievable when Slusher first ran for council in 1996. Slusher has also alienated some of the people who were annexed during his tenure, such as Circle C Ranch, by leading the charge to close three of the six lanes of Southwest Parkway, an effort that was

scuttled after a riotous public hearing that drew perhaps five hundred people, virtually all opposed to the idea.

Like Griffith, Slusher is a board member of the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and both of them can rightfully take credit for helping board chair Lee Walker turn around the once-troubled agency.

Robin Rather—This newcomer to elective politics would be a fresh face in a mayoral contest. The daughter of long-time CBS news anchor Dan Rather blew into town from Washington, DC, in the mid-nineteen-nineties with a famous last name and soon succeeded Kirk Mitchell as chair of the Save Our Springs Alliance. She made peace with some of SOSA's long-time political enemies, such as the Real Estate Council of Austin and the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, and together these groups worked, without success, to try to head off legislation that reinstated grandfather rights for denser development.

As SOSA's chair, Rather worked mostly behind closed doors and rarely took the point position in public, something she emphasized to me on one of those rare occasions in which she addressed the City Council (during hearings on the Forum Planned Unit Development, which she vehemently opposed). Rather spearheaded negotiations with major high-tech firms and helped persuade them to build new headquarters downtown and not over the aquifer, including Computer Sciences Corporation, Intel Corporation, and Vignette. Others who attended private meetings with some of these companies, such as Save Barton Creek Association President Jon Beall, praised the vigor with which she pressed her case.

The final split between Rather and SOSA was over the Bradley Settlement, which prescribed how developer Gary Bradley could develop sections of Circle C Ranch and undertake development of Spillar Ranch and Pflugger Ranch. Ultimately, shortly before the City Council was to make a final decision, SOSA's board voted unanimously to oppose the Bradley Settlement. Ten days later, Rather, convinced that Bradley had compromised enough, signed a letter in support of the settlement. The letter came as a jaw-dropping surprise to environmentalists in the audience on the night the council voted unanimously to approve the settlement. Despite the settlement, Bradley has once again traipsed back to the Texas Legislature for favors, this time seeking to form a special district for the Spillar Ranch development. Just one more reason why any environmentalist who touted a settlement with Bradley, who is considered by seasoned environmentalists to be the devil incarnate, may seem naive in retrospect.

Someone who has publicly supported Rather's bid for the mayor's post is former Council Member Brigid Shea, who helped found the Save Our Springs Coalition in 1991 and became its first director. The Coalition's successful petition drive got the Save Our Springs Ordinance on the ballot, and its resounding victory in May 1992 helped catapult both Shea and Jackie Goodman into council seats in 1993. But it's unclear how much longer Shea can claim to

be an environmentalist. Since quitting her job as SOSA's communications director in September 1999, Shea has started a consulting practice and in November 2000 she registered with the city as a lobbyist for Vignette—a firm that Rather helped convince to build a new headquarters downtown, with huge financial incentives from the city (a project that is in doubt now, with



Council Member Daryl Slusher

the downturn in the market)—and Brandt's Crossing, which was trying to get \$8 million in city funding to go forward with a traditional neighborhood development in far South Austin.

After departing SOSA, Rather moved to the Hill Country Conservancy, whose mission is to acquire land and development rights for preservation.

In Austin's private sector, Rather worked for IntelliQuest Information Group Inc.; then CMP Media Inc., a spin-off of Reality Research Inc.; and ultimately started her own small firm, MindWave Research Inc., of which she is president.

Rather is articulate and adept at massaging the press, but since the only environmental group she has headed won't stand behind her candidacy, it leaves the question of where her base of support lies for a mayoral bid. One group that may get on Rather's bandwagon are downtown interests that want to keep the development subsidies flowing, à la Computer Sciences Corporation, Intel, and Vignette, all of whom came downtown in part because of Rather's handiwork. While Rather's company services high-tech clients, she is not necessarily thought of as one of high-tech's own. And after the loss of the light-rail referendum that so many high-tech executives wrote checks for—to the tune of \$25,000 and \$10,000 apiece—it's not clear how much of a stomach they have for more political battles. With \$100 contribution limits specified by the City Charter, the influence of high-tech money would be minimized anyway, unless an independent committee is formed to influence the mayoral race from outside, as the Austin Police Association and Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson did in helping Danny Thomas unseat Willie Lewis last year.

Rather tells *The Good Life*, "We don't have a race now and no one seems to be clear on when we might have a race. So there doesn't seem to be much point in

random speculation." Of course that doesn't stop the speculation. Political consultant David Butts told the *Statesman*, in an article published February 27, that Rather was "thinking long and hard about it, and I think she will run."

It was that kind of talk that made the Austin appearance of Dan Rather as the star speaker at a Democratic Party fundraiser on March 21 (at Council Member Will Wynn's house) seem like a heavy-handed maneuver to boost his daughter's mayoral bid. While the event raised \$20,000 for the Democrats, it stained Dan Rather's reputation when the *Washington Post* broke the story April 4. CBS standards don't allow correspondents to participate in political party fund-raisers, and both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* published follow-up stories on April 5 about Dan Rather's apology.

Mark Tschurr—The man who succeeded Rather as SOSA chair has cut her no slack since taking the reins. Tschurr was one of the few to publicly and loudly criticize development incentives to bring Vignette downtown. His gripe was not with Vignette but with the city. With Intel Corporation's building stalled in its skeletal state and Vignette's project much in doubt, he's beginning to look less wild-eyed to some who supported these deals. Last December, Tschurr told *The Good Life* that he wanted Vignette downtown. "But what SOS and I'm appalled at is they should be subsidized and rewarded for doing what the community wants them to do already."

Tschurr claims to have a hard-line business attitude about such things, a reflection of his fifteen years as a high-tech executive, most of it running a semiconductor manufacturing firm, Tschurr Technology Corporation. He's no political neophyte, either. He competed against Jackie Goodman when she first ran in 1993, a race she won by a thumping sixty-two percent to his thirty-eight percent.

"I'm not necessarily interested in running for mayor," Tschurr tells *The Good Life*. "It really depends on who's going to run. If there's somebody who's going to lead in the direction that I would like to see the city move, there would be no need for me to participate in the process."

But Tschurr vows not to sit idly by if Rather runs. "If it turns out she's the leading candidate or it looks like she's going to be the dominant candidate, I will probably be inclined to run." He faults Rather for advocating downtown development subsidies, which he calls "appalling," and for touting the Bradley Settlement.

Tschurr says he would be more comfortable with either Gus Garcia or Beverly Griffith. "They have the ability to make decisions for the greater needs of the community," he says.

"I don't have any interest in running for mayor," Tschurr says. "I'm enjoying being a stay-at-home dad. But it would be difficult to sit on the sidelines and let our local government continue down the route it's going."

Mayoral race would turn on money and name ID

Because the mayoral contest, if there is one, must be run in a sprint that characterizes special elections, and because fund-

raising is limited to \$100 per contributor, the advantage belongs to two kinds of candidates: those with names already familiar to voters and those with money of their own to get out campaign messages. There is no legal limit on how much of a candidate's own money may be spent.

Gus Garcia, Jackie Goodman and Daryl Slusher all have household names but none of them has ever invested significant personal resources in their political campaigns, perhaps because they didn't have the funds to do so.

Beverly Griffith and Robin Rather, for certain, and maybe Mark Tschurr, could invest sizable sums in their own campaigns if they chose to do so.

Rumors are rampant that conservative candidates are being sought. Alan Sager, chair of the Travis County Republican Party, says he knows of no such candidate at this time. "Right now we do not have a candidate for mayor," he says. "No one's called me to run as a Republican (the mayoral and council races are nonpartisan), which is understandable in Austin." But, Sager adds, "If there is a conservative candidate in the race, we would like to be a force in that election." And since the party is sitting on a sizable war chest, it could indeed make a difference.

No one is discounting the fact that other candidates will surface if there is a special election.

The idea that Kirk Watson is so burned up with ambition and so fed up with being mayor that he'll resign may, in the end, turn out to be a fantasy dreamed up by political junkies with nothing to do. "It's Austin," Watson says of the situation. He jokingly chalks up the political jockeying to the fact that our fair city does not have a major league professional sports team.

Barbara Rush, a campaign consultant who remains close to the mayor and his family, says, "What if Kirk doesn't resign? Wouldn't Austin be surprised?"

Yes, Austin would be surprised if Watson does not resign. But the fact is that until the mayor either announces his plans to run for higher office or declares that he will not do so, there is a leadership vacuum in the City of Austin—despite the fact that Watson continues to fulfill the mayoral duties. Austin remains in political limbo, and a city that's in economic limbo does not profit from political uncertainty. Which returns us to the original question: O mayor, where art thou? g

Ken Martin is editor of The Good Life. He has won two national awards for investigative reporting, one while covering county government and politics for the Williamson County Sun in Georgetown, the other while reporting for the Austin Business Journal, where he subsequently was editor for four years.