

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: **Bill Bunch (BB)**

INTERVIEWER: David Todd (DT)

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DT: My name is David Todd. I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas. It's November 10, 2018 and we're at the home of Bill Bunch, and we have the opportunity to visit with him about his long and illustrious career as an environmental attorney and community organizer here in Austin, who's focused on many conservation issues but, in particular, efforts to protect Barton Springs, Hill Country, the Edwards Aquifer and so on. So thank you very much for spending time with us.

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BB: Certainly. My pleasure.

DT: We usually start these interviews with a question about your childhood and a query about whether there was somebody in your early days—a parent, a friend, a teacher—who might have influenced an interest in the outdoors, about conservation, natural world. Is there anything like that that you can recall?

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BB: Yes, indeed. I was born in San Antonio but I grew up in Arlington up Dallas-Fort Worth way. And I was lucky to live next door to a man who was the scoutmaster for a Boy Scout troop. And so he let me hang around with the scout troop and his two sons who were older than me when I was too young really to participate. But that influenced me heavily into getting into camping, getting out of the suburbs and into the woods. And then those older boys—so this was, you know, early '70s—the first wave of, you know, green environmentalism with the Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act, and I just absorbed it from the older boys that were in scouting.

DT: So were there— there camping trips that you recall?

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BB: Oh yeah, plenty. Mostly—the most fond ones were to Worth Ranch which was a scout camp on the Brazos River near Mineral Wells.

DT: And—

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BB: And then later, a big trip to Philmont, which is the big scout camp in New Mexico.

DT: Tell us a little bit more about Philmont.

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BB: Well I was just barely old enough to go. And my troop was not going so I went with a different troop, which actually turned out to be a great experience. I didn't know anybody but I made a whole new raft of friends on that trip. And I was a competitive swimmer at the time so I was in great shape. So even though I was one of the youngest, you know, I was keeping up with people quite well.

DT: So I—I think I understand that swimming and being in the water is—is a theme in your life. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your early days swimming and—and how that might have affected your life in years to come.

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BB: I followed my older sister into competitive swimming, starting when I was eight and I swam all the way through my first year in college. We were lucky enough to come down to Austin and New Braunfels and San Antonio for swim meets when I was quite young. And I guess trips to swim meets at Landa Park—at the pool there—were the ones that were most influential because that's where Comal Springs is—the—the largest spring in Texas. And I'd never seen water like that ever before. You know, we have cl—clean water up in North Texas but it's not clear.

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You know, the—the geology, the soils are clay soils so even if the water's clean, it's murky. And when I got to New Braunfels the first time for a swim meet when I think it was eight or nine, I just could not believe how beautiful it was.

DT: So you're talking about being a competitive swimmer and—and I was curious if you experienced the difference between not only clear water and murky water but between concrete, plaster, and tile pools and natural water streams—lakes, things like that?

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BB: Right. Well I came to love both quite a bit. And with the swim team, we would go out on adventure swims as well. On the Guadalupe River, in various lakes—years later, in the mountains as well up in Colorado and, you know, the structured pool is great for swimming and keeping time and—and doing that sort of disciplined swimming. But I just loved the natural water. And with goggles, you know, what you can see below the surface and the wildlife and fish and crawdads and aquatic plants, I just came to really love the life under the water.

DT: We—this may be one step backwards because you—you had earlier talked about Philmont and scouting with your scout master neighbor. But I understand that you're an Eagle Scout and I know, for a lot of people, that is a very big accomplishment if they get that far. And I was wondering if it had any influence on you to achieve that level?

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BB: Well I worked hard at it to get it done. And—but I loved it all the way. It was—it was—

it went along—it seemed to go along with the swimming. And I just, from an early age, I was just drawn towards, you know, outdoors and learning how to be comfortable and—and feel like I know—knew what I was doing out in the woods, even if I was by myself.

DT: Can—can you recall any camping trips or long hikes that you took as a young person?

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BB: Lots of them at Worth Ranch and then the—the big backpacking trip at Philmont was particularly memorable. And then I ac—I did a Christmas, five-day, backpack trip with an Explorer group at Big Bend National Park. And all of those were—were particularly powerful to me just being out in the wilderness in landscapes that were so completely different than what we—what I had at home. And always was the idea that, you know, you leave a place better than you found it.

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And the whole scout motto of, you know, be conservation minded was—was embedded in my existence. And then I was fortunate enough in high school to go with my swim coaches on a backpacking trip to Yellowstone National Park and Grand Tetons. And that was incredible as well. We were on the top of a mountain—a small one—but we just happened to stumble upon Willi Unsoeld and his daughter. He pioneered the West Ridge Route on mountain—now I'm blanking out—the highest mountain in the world—what is it?

DT: Everest?

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BB: Everest—the West Ridge Route on Mt. Everest. And his daughter was a very accomplished mountaineer as well. She was named Nanda Devi Unsoeld, which is the second tallest mountain in the world and she actually died climbing the mountain that she was named after a few years after we met her on that trip. It was kind of a interesting coincidence.

DT: Well so this—this carries us through your teenage years and—and I understand that—that, after you got out of high school, you went to the University of Colorado and you studied there and—and majored in environmental biology, right?

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BB: Yes, I—I started out as a engineering major but my first day of classes, I did not like the—the male to female ratio of students. And so I engaged my first battle with the burea—a big bureaucracy and I dropped and added my entire course load to switch to environmental biology major. And I was very glad that—that I was aggressive and—in making that early course correction. But Boulder's a spectacular place. I went up there with a good friend from high school who was a serious rock climber.

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And I was never serious but, you know, he enter—entertained me a bit and would drag me along. And then later we had another very serious climber roommate from New York City that we lived together for—off-campus—for a couple of years that was, you know, they were both very inspiring to me.

DT: Would y'all go bouldering or hiking?

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Yeah, we'd do hiking. We'd ski in the winter, which I had never skied before and learned to love it very quickly. And then I would go with them climbing. And if they were doing something that wasn't too crazy, I'd do it with them. And if they were, I'd just, you know, take my books and hang out and let them climb. But we were, you know, we were reading Edward Abbey at the time and—and other books that were inspiring us to love—love the outdoors and—and be committed to protecting it.

DT: Well and—were—it sounds like a lot of your experiences with—with your roommates and classmates and friends, but were there also teachers who might have been influential in your interest in the outdoors?

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BB: Yes, there were—there were a few of those. Probably the most influential was my ornithology professor, Olwen Williams. She was almost eighty at the time. She was way past retirement but re—retirement age—but she kept doing it. She had earned her PhD, you know, before Watson and Crick had discovered the double helix DNA. So just this unbelievable career. But, on the first day of class, we showed up and here's this ancient woman, this almost a—a caricature of older sort of kind of, you know, not frail but, you know, shrunken woman, and she had a hawk that was mounted on a, you know, a limb that was, you know, from the museum.

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And she's like petting this—this—this—this specimen and explaining why, you know, birds are by far the—the most amazing creatures that there are. And that whole course was oriented towards going on birdwatching trips on Saturday mornings and doing lab work and, you know, doing things other than just, you know, reading books and—and memorizing, you know, certain things—learning bird calls.

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Anyway, she was—she was incredibly inspiring. And then I had an environmental economics professor that was—was really good and a political science professor who was, you know, very challenging—that we—we dove into environmental issues in that class as well. So I was blessed with a number of—of inspiring professors at—at UC Boulder.

DT: So this—this environmental economics professor, was he starting to talk and think and explain about externalities and—?

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BB: Yeah, I was—it was an upper level course and I had almost no background in economics so I was—I was just soaking it up. But doing cost benefit analysis and how does that make sense in economic frameworks, externalities, yes, the whole market failure that results when you don't, you know, count all of those costs that are imposed on society and the environment when you're producing, you know, a good or service. And it really helped me later in my career to have that grounding in economic analysis on—of environmental issues.

DT: And—and it sounds like you—you—you got good lessons about understanding biology and analyzing economics. Was there a teacher who was also giving you a, you know, advice about conservation and advocacy and activism or encouraging you to move in that direction?

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BB: My—the political science professor, Steve Paulson, he was an activist and we read Philip Slater's *Earthwalk* and that book that was not a famous book. He was better known for his book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* was the hit that he wrote. So he was this—basically a sociologist. But that inspired me towards, you know, valuing things other than money I guess and sort of living, you know, for a purpose rather than for material gain. And then in law school, I was blessed with having Joe Sax as a professor.

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And he's sort of the godfather of environmental law—al—almost invented the field. And that was a law school in Berkeley.

DT: Well did you decide to go to UC Berkeley for Law School for just general good education or because you were already interested in environmental law?

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BB: Well I started in environmental biology thinking I might go into environmental advocacy. I'd had that idea from high school and it wasn't like I ever decided, yes, I want to be an environmental lawyer advocate but nothing else ever, you know, you know, jumped out at me. So I just sort of started going in that direction and I kept going. The law school at—at Berkeley had a strong environmental program there, the first environmental law journal, *Ecology Law Quarterly*, was there.

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And all the big national groups, you know, had office—big offices in either San Francisco or Oakland, Berkeley, so I knew there'd be some opportunity to do internships there as well. And it was just a great, overall law school and I got in so I went. And, of course, the Bay Area's a nice place to be as well. I loved it there.

DT: And did you stay there for long or did you come back to Texas almost immediately?

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BB: I—I—I almost stayed but I came back for two—the two summers between first and second and then second and third year—to work in Austin. And then after law school, I was—I had a good offer to stay in San Francisco but I felt like, you know, the whole environmental advocacy world was incredibly well-established at the time in California, whereas in Texas, there was almost nobody doing it. So I knew that if I came back to Texas, I could do stuff that nobody else was doing, you know, immediately and sort of, you know, step into a leadership position, rather than sort of work my way up.

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And there was just an incredible need here because so few people were—were advocating for environmental protection in Texas.

DT: Well so if—if I've got this right—in 1987, you come back to Austin and—

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BB: '86.

DT: '86, I'm sorry—and you go to work for Henry and Kelly, is that right?

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BB: Yeah, Stuart Henry—I had clerked for them in the summers of '84 and '85 and then I came back to work with them after I finished law school, you know, fall of '86.

DT: Can you tell a little bit about that firm because it's—it's pretty distinctive place and still—it still exists, of course.

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BB: So Stuart Henry was the senior partner. He was pretty much the first lawyer in Texas doing environmental law and making a living on the side of the environment, rather than, you know, representing, you know, corporate or development interests, who were, you know, wanting permits and approvals to do what they wanted to do. And just by happenstance a—a friend of mine from—from high school had a older sister who was in law school with Stuart's partner, Tom Mason. And I just made a connection there.

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That first summer, I just cold-called them and said hey, do you need a law intern? And Austin's economy was booming. At the time, I thought well if I don't get a law, I, you know, roof houses or do something, make a living. Here's some great live music, eat some Tex-Mex, swim in Barton Springs—but it worked out that Stuart hired me that first summer and we hit it off. And so then I—I worked with them the second summer and then came back after law school.

DT: Well and—if—if I understand this, you were there through about 1990, is that correct?

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BB: Right.

DT: And you worked for a whole variety of private landowners and environmental groups like the Hill Country Foundation, the Sierra Club, and Travis Audubon, Texas River Protection Association. Can you talk about some of the cases you took on and the role that you played?

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BB: Yeah, so we represented a lot of landowners, mostly in rural areas, who were threatened with dams and being flooded out and literally forced off of their—their land. Others who were threatened with having municipal landfills located, you know, next to them that would threaten their health and their property values. So we did a number of fighting reservoirs, landfills, and then I did quite a bit of work working for landowners in South Texas where there was a uranium mining industry that was—people were very

concerned about—threatening their water wells primarily but also, you know, other, you know, air quality and just exposure concerns as well.

DT: These were uranium leach mines?

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BB: Yeah, most of—most of them were the leach mining, where they'd drill wells and sort of push the fluids around in the—the formation that are actually aquifers that have the uranium in there and they—they change the chemistry to, you know, sort of have the uranium released into the water so they can, you know, pump it up and then extract it that way. There was some remnant surface, you know, strip mining of uranium as well that we dealt with a little bit and then some big dumps of the mill — mine tailings that we were trying to get cleaned up.

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Most of that was in Karnes County near Panna Maria, which is the oldest continuously occupied Polish-American community founded by the—the Polish immigrants in the 1850s. That was very interesting experience there and that community's effort to engage first Chevron—that had been the original miner—and then some other players that came in later.

DT: If I remember this, the—the Catholic Church was pretty deeply involved in organizing in Panna Maria?

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BB: Yes. I mean, the Catholic Church was really the heart of that community and they had a—an activist priest at the time, who was really trying to help the community protect themselves from being sort of overrun or harmed by these big, giant corporations that were doing this sort of little known uranium mining process that was a risk to their health.

DT: As—as—as I read it, you—you worked for a lot of these nonprofit groups though and private landowners, you know, these communities, but also in environmental advocacy groups. Can you talk about some of those cases you took on?

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BB: Yeah. So did some early work for the Texas River Protection Association trying to keep river flows in the Guadalupe River on a—where Kerrville was wanting to divert more water out of the river, San Marcos River Foundation—did some work for them trying to clean up the San Marcos Sewer Plant that discharged into the San Marcos River. And I'm still doing a lot of work with that group today. That started a great relationship.

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A lot of volunteer and—and, you know, greatly reduced rates of work for—for the Sierra Club, and then a lot of volunteer work also with Earth First, which was sort of the—the radical environmental group that was active in Austin at the time of which I made a bunch of friends with those folks and trying to protect the endangered species that lived right here but people hadn't really paid much attention to them before then.

DT: What—what type of animals—creatures were they?

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BB: Well so the black-capped vireo was listed endangered I believe in '87. That was the first one in this area. And that sort of woke people up to the idea that, you know, protecting endangered species wasn't something, you know, we needed to pay attention, you know, in South America and the rain forest or the whooping cranes down on the coast, but that we had some unique species right in our own backyard that warranted protection and were threatened by Austin Grouse, even at that time. So that was the first listing.

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And then we did some real advocacy to force the listing of the golden-cheeked warbler as endangered. So both of those are migratory songbirds that nest here in Central Texas and, for the warbler, nowhere else in the world. This is their entire nesting range right here in Central Texas. And then we also forced the listing of five—what we call cave critters—small invertebrates that were found in a handful of caves in northwest Travis County. And it—

[misc.]

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BB: And then years later, we did work to force the listing of the Barton Springs Salamander as endangered. But in that sort of late '80s, into the early '90s period, the—the focus was on the—the songbirds and the cave critters.

DT: So how would you press for a listing with Fish & Wildlife? How did that work?

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BB: Well with the—with the warbler, there had been a propo—it had been a candidate for a long time and there'd been a proposal to list it and also with the cave critters from Travis Audubon Society years before I arrived. And it was just sort of sitting on a shelf. And we—we found out about that and then we're seeing that there was major construction happening out in that Four Points area of northern Travis County that were directly threatening the best golden-cheeked warbler habitat in the world in the Upper Bull Creek Watershed and then also a number of caves that are in that exact same area that—that were home to these cave critters.

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So under the Endangered Species Act, there is a—a mechanism for citizen enforcement actions to force listings of species if there's imminent danger to their survival. So we filed notice of intent to sue letters saying, you know, you got to—you got to move. You got to list these critters right away. And I partnered with a lawyer from the National Wildlife Federation in their—their national office up in D.C. to help with that, in particular, on the warbler listing. And the Earth Firsters were out in the field, you know, documenting the sort of strategic destruction of habitat because developers knew that the species was—could be listed any day.

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And the most well-known of this incident—H. Ross Perot—who had later ran for president—he had bought a bunch of land for development up in northwest Austin and had

started, you know, clearing—bringing in these giant, you know, tree-eating machines to just, you know, bulldoze and—and destroy this old growth, mixed oak, cedar woodlands that's the warbler habitat. And he did so without a p—any sort of permitting. And so the Earth First activist discovered this, reported it to the city.

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The city red-tagged them saying hey, you know, you're doing de—pre-development constructing clearing. You've got to get a permit. And then we also alerted the Fish & Wildlife Service that this was going on. Perot's people said oh, they were clearing for agricultural purposes, not for development and they brought some goats out there. So—so we talked about Mr. Perot as the—the billionaire goat herd of Travis County. So that didn't fly too well.

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So after we filed this intent to sue for emergency listing, they did actually publish an emergency listing within a couple lea—weeks for the golden-cheeked warbler and then later followed it up with the—the—the normal endangered listing.

DT: Well it—it's interesting that you talk about this situation with the goat herder and—and the—some of your partners were with large national organizations like National Wildlife Federation and you're, I guess bureaucratic, sometimes foe, sometimes partner at U. S. Fish & Wildlife, but—but it—it's interesting to me that you also were working with Earth First and it was sort of on the ground doing direct action I guess. And could you talk about your involvement with Ve—Earth First over the years, including that case?

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BB: Yeah, well I had first become aware of them in college in Boulder when Dave Foreman was doing his national, you know, Earth First Road Shows and rounding up and inspiring people to protect nature for its own sake. And that was sort of their biocentric worldview that, you know, nature has its own rights and its own value rather than protect it in some sort of utilitarian purpose, you know, for the benefit of humans. So there was a—there was an intellectual component but it was also this sort of, you know, rowdy, you know, have fun, you know, get out there and do it and, you know, don't get tied up in court.

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But later when I was in Austin, you know, we sort of combined the two. So you had some of the Earth First who I—Earth Firsters who I became very good friends with—dated one of the—the leaders—doing, you know, occupying caves, for example, that were being threatened with being bulldozed and there was a famous cave-in where a couple of the Earth Firsters camped out in a cave—actually Tooth Caves—that the owner, who was a developer and dentist, was threatening to—to fill that cavity.

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And they actually blocked that threat from happening and, again, got the cave critters listed on an expedited basis, in order to protect those habitats and—and it's protect—Tooth Cave is now in a—in a preserve that's managed by the city today. So it was a ver—it was—it was fun to sort of combine the sort of, you know, using the—the legal tools that are there under the Endangered Species Act with the—the willingness of, you know, these college kids

basically to, you know, go out and stomp around and see what's going on and—and document what was—what was happening at the time.

DT: Well you've—you've talked some about legal actions, whether it was, you know, water treatment or uranium mining or landfills, reservoirs. I understand that—that, from—I guess this is the late '80s—'89-'90, you also were doing research and some of it was about the Resolution Trust Corporation and this effort to call back properties that were held from failed savings and loans. And I was hoping you could tell about that because that was such an active effort here in Austin.

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BB: Yeah. Well so when—when we were sort of waking up to the idea that there were these incredible habitats that were important to these indigenous species that lived here and nowhere else in the world, it was right after the whole, you know, savings and loan deregulation by Reagan in the early '80s and the boom that that—that fueled by unleashing all this capital to be very speculatively invested in development. And then the bust.

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And so all these financial institutions in Texas, across the country but especially in Texas, had gone under and the federal banking insurance agencies had taken over these failed banks and savings and loans and then—and—and their assets quite often. You know, they'd foreclose and now they owned all this property. And even though Texas is a private property state, at the time, the federal government owned vast—I mean, I can't remember the percentage, but a huge part of Travis County was owned by essentially the federal government.

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And so we started figuring out that this—this was an incredible opportunity—that if we could just get some of these assets out of the management of the bank insurance agencies, FDIC, and then the Resolution Trust Corporation that was set up specifically to deal with the savings and loan failed bank—sa—failed S&Ls and their assets and into state govern—state park land or local park land or even federal park land, that there was just an incredible opportunity there. And so we got some funding through the Texas Center for Policy Studies to really work on this idea of, you know, let's grab some of these bank assets and get them into conservation.

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A lot of them should have never been targeted for development in the first place. It was—there's a lot of bank fraud. They were just—they were fake developments really—some of them. And then others were just so ridiculously speculative that, you know, they were never going to survive anyway. Or w—you know, they might build out thirty years later but the—they were being financed as if they would build out, you know, in two or three years. So we—we had this first idea of anywhere in the country to—this idea of sort of debt for nature swap on a domestic level.

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There had earlier been iteration where some developing countries had gotten into big financial straits with the World Bank and the other inter—multilateral development banks. And they were trying to say okay, we'll write down your debt if you'll, you know, preserve big swaths of rain forest. It's like well if—if that concept works, you know, in—in the—in

the Amazon, you know, why not right here in the United States.

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And so we actually managed to get a little bit of legislation through and adopted by congress that gave conservation buyers the first shot at acquiring assets that were more than fifty acres, that had conservation value, that were being held by either FDIC or a Resolution Trust Corporation or were being overseen by a trustee of one of the failed institutions that they were managing. And so a lot of land got protected here and nationally through that—that program but it was just—it—it was a tiny fraction of what it should have been.

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It wasn't a—a complete bust and it was actually meaningful but it could have been, you know, order of magnitude more land protected had it been taken seriously. But the—the—the bankers, the financiers who controlled those agencies and those processes—they weren't interested in seeing those assets go into conservation. They wanted to flip them back out into the development market. And—and a lot of the people, the federal government hired to manage those failed assets were the exact same people, you know, that caused the problem in the first place.

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And so they—they—they real—it was a sort of a big revolving door thing where okay, we—we tried it once, it failed. We dumped the debt on the taxpayers but when—then we sell the off cheap to the same people that, you know, took the money and ran the first time and then start the development back up again. And we—some of those failed at—properties are still being developed now today and, you know, it's what thirty years later.

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But we got a bunch of them saved. So vast preserve land in Barton Creek Watershed were failed bank assets that went into the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan Preserve System.

DT: This might be a good segue to talk about one of your other encounters with the development community and what I'm thinking of is the PUD back in I guess it's the early '90s and the sort of uprising at City Council in June of—was that '91?

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BB: '92.

DT: '92, I'm sorry. And—and your role in—in—in leading that—that response and—and the, I guess the origins of the Save Our Springs Coalition and Alliance in the years to come. Could you sort of take us back to that time and—and how this group got started?

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BB: Yes, so, you know, the—the boom and the bust had happened and vast lands that had been targeted for development along Barton Creek and along the, at that time, not—incomplete Southwest Parkway had gone back to the federal government through these failed development loan processes and this big multinational mining corporation, Freeport-McMoRan, based in New Orleans and led by a former UT football player, Jim Bob Moffett, had bought up the old Barton Creek development that former Governor John Connally and

his partner, former

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Lieutenant Governor Ben Barnes had tried to develop actually two prop—well one property was a big Barton Creek development and they put together several others that they bought for dirt cheap, you know, pennies on the dollar from FDIC and—and RTC—five thousand acres—and they repackaged it into a new development and then take it th—to the city to get that five thousand acre PUD, Planned Unit Development, approved. A lot of the land was going to be low density development, you know, single family, you know, high end homes, which there was some concern about that.

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But a big chunk of it was going to be massive commercial development, three million square feet of commercial development so basically three Barton Square miles plus thousands and thousands of units of—of multi-family. So it was the biggest development pro—proposal that had ever come to the city and here it was right on the banks of Barton Creek. So once the word got out about it, people were concerned and all of the sort of active environmental groups came together to—to oppose it with Save Barton Creek Association and the Local group of the Sierra Club being sort of at the forefront.

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And I—I jumped in, you know, just as a volunteer, at that point, to help sort of organize that opposition. It all came to head on June 7th of 1990. Actually we—we said '92. That was the Save Our Springs Ordinance which followed from this. So it was actually June of—June 7, 1990 was an all-night hearing at the City Council meeting where hundreds and hundreds of people showed up to testify against this Barton Creek, five thousand acre, development. The Council ended up voting at like 6:30 the next morning, voting it down.

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So it was a big—a big victory but it just started—the—the battle continued for years after that. But it was that galvanizing event that led to the formation of the Save Our Springs Coalition as a political entity because we saw pretty quickly that the city ordinances were not sufficient to protect Barton Creek and Barton Springs from these huge developments and we knew this was just going to be the first one of others and that we needed a much stronger ordinance to protect water quality, limit impervious cover and—and keep development at a—a much smaller footprint, in order to—to keep the water clean that flows to the springs.

DT: This might be a good chance to just talk a little bit about Barton Springs and what it means to Austin and to you, in particular.

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BB: Well it's the fourth largest spring in Texas. It's—it's a—a significant reason why they located the Capitol here because it provided a reliable source of water for both drinking water and for milling, you know, economic development, energy. And also, you know, it was a central location is what they were looking for for the Capitol. But before we had the Highland Lakes and those dams built, Barton Springs was the reliable source of water because upstream the river would go dry or barely—very nearly dry.

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And so they built the—the—the original Austin on the north bank of the river but right

where the spring flows—entered the river and pushed across to that north bank where the city could build its first water treatment plants there. So the city's here, quite literally, because of Barton Springs. You can say the same thing for San Marcos and San Marcos Springs, New Braunfels, New Braunfels—Comal Springs. San Antonio was located at the—the—the Great Springs of—of the San Antonio Springs and San Pedro Springs.

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And all of these emerged from, you know, the Edwards Aquifer. So that underground river, the Edwards Aquifer, is the life source for the whole region and is why we're here literally—sitting here today because of Barton Springs. It's underground so while people have some awareness of it, it's still very hard for people to visualize, you know, where it is or how it works or, you know, what the threats are. So that's a challenge.

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But, for me also, I bought this house because it's close to the Springs because I wanted to go swimming every day or as—as often as I could and it's just, you know, it's spectacularly beautiful. It brings nature into the heart of our city. The snorkeling's spectacular in the springs and then in the creek downstream of the springs. So and I've made it my life's work to—to try to protect the springs.

DT: You talked a little bit about the—the uprising and—and the—the vote against the PUD and—and then you've—your discovery that the ordinances that were on the books were really not adequate. And—and so there was an effort with SOS to try to prepare ordinances that would be effective in protecting Barton Springs and the whole creek and watershed. Can you talk about that effort to both draft—get them passed and then get them defended?

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BB: Yes. So—so after the big all-night PUD uprising, you know, what came out of that was an agreement that the—the ordinance on the books, which was the Comprehensive Watershed Ordinance, which we discovered was sort of the comprehensive loophole ordinance—that we needed a stronger ordinance. And the—so there was a process led by Mayor Bruce Todd to write a stronger ordinance in—in a sort of collaborative process that went for about a year after that.

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But after nine months or so, we sort of figured out that, you know, they're not going to have the political fortitude to actually do what needs to be done because the developers just had too much influence with counsel and—and staff. So we came up with the idea that we could write our own ordinance under—and—and—and petition it onto the ballot under the—the City Charter. Texas does not have statewide initiative and referendum but the—the larger home rule cities, most of them have in their charter, initiative and referendum for ordinances and then the constitution allows for initiative and referendum on charter amendments. So we wrote our own ordinance.

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We—we created the Save Our Springs Coalition. We wrote the Save Our Springs Ordinance with a lot of input from technical experts—Lauren Ross was our go-to expert but we got—we got a lot of help drafting it and then petitioned it onto the ballot. There was a huge campaign around it in—leading up to the vote in August of '92.

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And it was sort of a seminal moment in that the Chamber of Commerce spent enormous sums of money fighting it saying that it was going to chase away jobs and industry by being too restrictive and that if we were going to—you know, we were basically, you know, telling companies to go somewhere else, that we didn't want them here, you know, that it was no growth and they would destroy our economy. And our argument in favor was the opposite is that no, people want to live here.

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And our economy, long term, depends upon us protecting the—Barton Springs and that this is actually the very best thing we can do for economic—a sustainable and healthy economic development. And the voters agreed with us. The vote was about 64 percent in favor. It was almost 2 to 1 in favor of Save Our Springs Ordinance. And then, after that, sort of the—the chamber adopted the argument and—and embraced the idea that okay, protecting the environment is good for the economy. That's how we can market Austin.

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Unfortunately, they just adopted it, in my view, more as a marketing message rather than, you know, a real value to be upheld. There were subsequently legal attacks on the validity of the ordinance and it was initially stricken down at the district court level but then that was reversed at the Court of Appeals and then the Texas Supreme Court eventually ruled that it was a valid municipal ordinance. And it's still on the books today. So all that was great.

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But, on the downside, the developers then went to the state legislature to win passage of a grandfathering ordinance that took a whole lot of development back to pre-SOS standards. They initially passed it in the legislative session of '93 but Governor Ann Richards vetoed that legislation but then she was defeated by George Bush and they brought it back the next session—essentially the same bill and passed it and then Bush signed that. So all of Texas now has this very draconian grandfathering statute whereby developments and other economic development projects are able to go forward under weak standards from the '80s or even the '70s.

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And we still see grandfathered projects coming through in Austin today.

DT: And I think I understand that—that some of these grandfather projects were sort of cocktail napkin scale plans.

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BB: Yeah, some of them were sketched out, you know, very rudimentary and—and filed right before the election and—and the developers did manage to delay. The vote was supposed to be in May of '92 but the council re—r—r—refused to abstain and refused to call the election. We sued to force it onto the May ballot but it—they managed to delay it to August. And in that three-month window, you know, thousands of acres of development were—people filed stuff.

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But the other thing that happened is the grandfathering legislation was so draconian that they—a lot of them were able to go back to these completely bankrupt filings that had been, you know, filed with the city in the early '80s and then literally gone bankrupt and,

you know, and were moribund. But while they didn't have to pay their debts on the land, they could still claim the rights under those filings from, you know, the S&L deregulation era.

DT: From what I've heard, there—there is a sort of commonality between protecting the—the vireo and the warbler and the—the cave critters and the salamanders and protecting water quality. So and that—that the—the overlap is—is then trying to preserve intact habitat. Is that—is that so and—and if that's true, what sort of strategies did you take and to try to protect land in other ways besides going to court?

00:54:52

BB: Well so—so, you know, this is Texas. You know, we're private property rights state and we don't like regulation. And, unfortunately, you know, pre-Reagan, there was broad consensus, Republican/Democrat, that protecting the environment was a good thing. And that meant regulating development, regulating industry to not pollute our waters or destroy endangered species habitats. Reagan changed that entirely for the Republican Party, with the idea that all regulation was bad and was hostile to economic health.

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And so now it's—there's sort of been this divide. So—and that idea of being hostile to environmental regulation is very much ingrained in Texas. That's why the grandfathering legislation got passed overwhelmingly. So we realized that we couldn't reg—we couldn't, through regulation, protect the springs or protect these endangered species.

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So there's been a huge amount of advocacy since the '80s to re—get public dollars brought to the table to buy land to preserve it for—for wildlife habitats, but also to preserve it for watershed protection, preserving that natural—those natural processes the rain falling on the land, m—m—going into the aquifer clean, and coming out at the springs. So we just, you know, last week voted another 72 million dollars—the voters of Austin—to buy more watershed preserve lands in the Barton Springs Watershed, so that it would never be developed and will be permanently preserved to help us protect the water quality.

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So it's—it's regulation and then the sort of permanent protection by either buying land outright or buying conservation easements that, you know, restrict development of the land.

DT: And this—this money that you mentioned, the—the 70 odd million dollars, that's municipal bond money from the City of Austin? Is that correct?

00:57:25

BB: Yes, yes. The first one the city did was in '98 under Mayor Watson that was specifically for buying land for water quality protection and not for parks but—but for protecting water quality. And that was a 65 million dollar bond. And then we did a couple of smaller ones between now and then and then we just did this additional 72 million dollars. So we're at about 250 million dollars the voters have spent preserving Barton Springs Watershed land, which sounds like a lot but my understanding of the price tag for the—for the 290 and I35 Interchange—a single highway interchange—is double that—500 million.

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So, you know, where—where are our values really today? Had we spent more and preserved a lot more land, we would not have been needing to expand South MoPac or expand 290 out to Dripping Springs. It is literally much cheaper to save Barton Springs than to pave the springs watershed. We haven't quite gotten that message out there yet but we've at least made some—some significant progress.

DT: And I—I think that you've been really deeply involved in trying to block the extension of—of roadways such as state Highway 45 into the Barton Watershed. And can you give us a kind of, you know, 101 lesson in why you were involved in that, why that's important to protect the watershed?

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BB: Well, you know, development follows the infrastructure. And since this is Texas, counties don't have zoning powers. Cities have very limited land use control powers, in part, because this grandfathering notion that we talked about. And so the way you can sort of manage and steer development in the areas where you want it to go and away from areas where you don't want it to go, is by where we put our—our public dollars for roads, water, and sewer infrastructure because those are the essentials for development.

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And so we've focused a huge amount of effort in trying to steer where those public investments of taxpayer and ratepayer dollars go because the highway dollars are mostly controlled by TexDOT. We haven't had that much luck on just, you know, influencing the decision up front. So we have had some litigation under the National Environmental Policy Act, challenging their failure to look honestly at alternatives and have a fair alternatives analysis of—of these projects.

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The courts—the federal courts in Texas and the Fifth Circuit have been incredibly hostile to environmental plaintiffs. So we've lost those cases. What we have done is manage to get higher levels of mitigation measures in—engineered into those highway projects, toll road projects, some of them now. So there's been some benefit. And then we've—we've slowed down the—the massive expansion of MoPac that would go over Ladybird Lake and it stretched down to Slaughter Lane. So that—that was their rushing forward on that and that's been put on hold.

01:01:38

And so we're getting some traction there to try to scale that down to something that's not quite so painful. But pollution runoff from highways is incredibly nasty so that's a concern directly but it's more the concern of the development that these highway projects spawn by providing, you know, opening up more land further out into the watershed for urban and suburban development.

DT: I think you—you—you mentioned this one kind of infrastructure—roads and streets—and the extension into the watershed but I think you've also been involved in—in—and you mentioned—trying to limit the extension of other kinds of infrastructure like water treatment and wastewater treatment and I was hoping you could talk about water treatment plant #4, which you were pretty deeply involved in.

01:02:37

BB: Yeah, that was—that was a huge fi—fight. So the city has had two water treatment plants at the time. They had—and one of the biggest errors of the city in his—in the city's history, in my view, had shut down their original green water treatment plant on Ladybird Lake right downtown so they could be redeveloped for private development. They had an incredible opportunity to—to embrace a—a new technology that could have shrunk the footprint to 25 percent of the—the previous footprint and redevelop the other 75 percent and utilized all those pi—you know, the intake pipes, the distribution pipes, and all that infrastructure was in place.

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And people—most cities never shut down water treatment plants for that very reason—you—your distribution system's in place, you—you up—you—you rehab it forever. Same with sewer plants. You never actually shut them down. You just, you know, you—you repair them as needed. And—but we did this very stupid thing and shut down the green. At the time, they were going to build a new one in East Austin, where our development would go but then the politics pushed us—pushed to instead build this plant out on Lake Travis Northwest with the idea that we needed additional treatment capacity.

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We did—we had solved our treatment capacity problem for almost free by going to a two-day per week watering schedule where your address number is assigned the day that you can water. So it leveled out the demand whereas before, what you would have is you'd have these huge spikes—peak demand—when everybody's watering their lawn on Saturday and Sunday morning, you know, in August. And so the city was still thinking that we needed to accommodate these incredibly high peak demand days by building a half a billion dollar, you know, five hundred million dollar water treatment plant to accommodate these peak demands as a problem, again.

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We had already shaved those peaks. We will never get to the peak—I don't think we'll ever as a city get to the peak daily demands that we had in the early '90s before we instituted the watering schedule and leveled out, you know, the water usage across all seven days of the week. And then and when we get in drought conditions, you're cut back to, you know, one day a week. Actually I think maybe—I don't even remember—maybe we're at—at one day a week right now full-time. I don't water my lawn so I've forgotten.

01:06:00

But it was—we fought the plant on just straight up economic turns, you know, phenomenal waste of money, don't need it, we'll take money away from investing in water efficiency investments, and—and really pushing us to keep our water level even—level—even as population grows, which we—we've done as a city, as a state. You know, our population's booming but we're using essentially the same amount of water we were using 20 years ago.

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And we can keep—we can keep that pace going, keep it—that flat demand with just a little bit of attention. And spending money on a giant treatment plant was instead, you know, maintaining this mindset that we meet future water needs that are going to be higher than today by expanding capacity of treatment, expanding access to water supplies.

DT: So, Bill, we talked about your work on water treatment plant #4 and just this whole issue of infrastructure and drinking water supplies. And I—I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about this—or flip side of it in the—the effort to try to upgrade wastewater treatment standards and—and, you know, whether it's point source discharges or land application or septic tanks or drain fields, I mean, you've worked on every one of those. And—and I was hoping you could give us some examples of those.

01:07:39

BB: Well the, you know, the big effort with the Save Our Springs Ordinance, the focus of the ordinance, and a lot of our work has been on the non-point source pollution threat. So that's all the nasty stuff that runs off—off of our streets and parking lots and lawn and golf course landscaped areas and the chemicals and pollutants that go with that. That's been a big part of our effort. But the other one is wastewater.

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The City of Austin had adopted a policy to help protect the springs of not extending water or sewer service into the Barton Springs Watershed and trying to focus those investments on our preferred growth areas along the Interstate 35 corridor. But, unfortunately, the Lower Colorado River Authority and others stepped in to deliver some of those—that water and sewer infrastructure to facilitate development outside the city. So Bee Caves and then out 290 to Dripping Springs.

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So they're delivering the water from Lake Austin primarily and then the sewer service, until recently, has been with treatment plants that—that treat the wastewater and then irrigate it on land, either fields or golf courses where, if it's done right, the plants and soils assimilate the remaining pollutants and it doesn't get into—to our streams. And this is what the original Clean Water Act that congress had in mind, from 1972, is to eliminate discharges, that we manage our wastewater in a way that we're not discharging pollutants into our streams, our rivers, our lakes, and reservoirs.

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Those plants have caused a lot of pollution because they're not operated properly or managed properly. They irrigate when the soils are saturated and they should be storing it and waiting until the—the soils can absorb it again. Pipes break and it's—they stay broken. The irrigation is not done evenly over the irrigation areas. It gets concentrated and so instead of being a no discharge operation, it's basically indirect discharge.

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So there's very good science now from the U. S. Geological Survey and City of Austin Research that those plants serving developments out 290 in the Bee Cave area primarily, are delivering nutrients into the streams that's then recharging into the aquifer and coming out at Barton Springs. And what that basically is is fertilizer and fertilizer in the water does, like it does on the land, it stimulates plant growth. And so we get this nuisance algae blooms and then that can lead to lower dissolved oxygen.

01:11:14

But, on the whole, it's far preferable to do that sort of irrigation, no discharge approach than to just treat it and dump it directly into the streams. And, for years, nobody even tried to do that because it was understood that would violate Clean Water Act standards, that

you simply cannot dump sewage into these crystal clear Hill County streams without just messing them up, degrading the water quality.

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But there's been such a push of deregulation at the state and federal level that now some development interests, including the City Council at Dripping Springs, feel like well it might violate Clean Water Act standards but the state's not going to—they'll—they'll give us a permit anyway. And so now there's a push to—do disch—to go for permits that allow direct discharge into the streams that feed Barton Springs and the other Edwards Springs. So it's—it's—it's a—it's a huge battle now over how we—we manage wastewater that is generated by the development that—that takes place in the watershed.

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So we're fighting those permits through the legal, administrative hearing process with our staff lawyers at—at Save Our Springs, and then if—if we have to—to go to the courthouse, we'll do that as well.

DT: I think a number of years ago, you—you had worked on some of these wastewater discharge issues outside of Austin. I think that you'd worked in San Marcos, in the City of Castroville, and maybe you can talk about some of those efforts.

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BB: So in the—the San Marcos case, the city's discharging into the river but downstream of the springs and downstream of the aquifer but it's still a spectacular stretch of river, you know, going—going southeast towards the coast. And so they were expanding their plant. And we wanted to force them to upgrade the treatment standards. And so I represented the San Marcos River Foundation in a—a permitting process, an administrative, legal process.

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And we were successful in forcing the city to put on phosphorous removal that would help, you know, limit the algae growth that would be generated by this discharge and—and do—and some other protective measures as well. It had a tremendous effect on the river. The river was—has been much cleaner below that discharge than it had been before that time. Now that was right around 2000. Since then, the technology's gotten even better. And that's another big part of the overall battle is—is forcing both the older plants and new plants to use the currently available best technology.

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There's tremendous resistance against it because it does cost a little bit more but it's not that much more. At Castroville, there they were—had a permit where they were irrigating an agreement with the farmer—they were using the treated wastewater to irrigate hay pastures and they wanted to switch towards discharging it into the Medina River. And, again, I worked with the—the—no, actually that was the Texas Rivers Protection Association where we fought that and ultimately negotiated a settlement with the city so that they would continue the irrigation process and not discharge into the river.

DT: Well this work you've done in San Marcos and Castroville sort of remind me of how you've become sort of holistic about this, where, you know, you started working a lot in the Austin and Barton Springs Aquifer Zone but—but you've—you've helped build this Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance to try to bring together a lot of communities that face very

similar things that are happening here in Barton but up and down the Edwards Plateau. And I—I was hoping that you could talk about the Alliance and—and some of the efforts to try to make this a kind of regional environmental effort.

01:16:00

BB: Yeah. So the—so the initial focus of Save Our Springs Alliance, which we incorporated after the ordinance was approved by the voters in '92, to help defend the ordinance because we knew we couldn't rely on the city to defend the ordinance that we had to force upon them in the first place. We—within a couple of years, we sort of expanded our scope of work to the—the larger Edwards Aquifer Region, you know, which is the—essentially the Hill Country Region. And we're even doing work, you know, east of and downstream of—of the aquifer as well as the—our own group, but we also realized we weren't the best voice for these other communities.

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So we helped found the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, which is based in San Antonio and is doing very similar types of advocat—advocacy work there as well. And then we've been doing a lot of work in close partnership with the San Marcos River Foundation to get more land bought and preserved over the recharge zone on the west side of San Marcos.

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And then just this last year, we helped sort of spin off or incorporate another regional group, the Great Springs Project, that will focus on land conservation with the idea that we will he—try to establish a national park scale conservation corridor that would go from Austin to San Antonio over the recharge zone and just preserver as much of that land as we possibly can from a regional perspective rather than just each community looking at it, you know, on their—their piece of it.

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And then, along the way, several—lots of other local groups have sprung up to fill a void that, you know, we're still a small nonprofit—we can't do it all. So the Trinity Edwards Springs Protection Association was created with Jim Blackburn and others to fight some of these proposed pumping permits that threatened to drain spring flows at Jacobs Well and—and some of the other Trinity Springs that—that feed the Edwards.

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The Hill Country Alliance was established to be kind of a voice also for the region and also more of a forum for bringing together both business and government and environmental groups to—to sort of think more holistically about protecting the whole region, not just water, but dark skies, you know, preserving some of the rural character of the Hill Country so that it—it's not just one giant exurb and especially so that we don't replicate the I35 corridor over on the 281 corridor, which there are definitely some development interests who would like to do that.

DT: You've also I think turned to education, in addition to litigation and trying to buy land. And I was hoping you could talk about some of the maps you've produced, the Barton Springs University, some of those efforts.

01:19:44

BB: We—we have. We haven't done near enough of it. You know, one of my regrets is, you

know, being a lawyer, I was drawn towards the law because that's what I feel competent in. I wish I had spent more time on the sort of community education and organizing and community building processes but we are trying to catch up on that.

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So about four years ago, we created this Barton Springs University Program to be sort of the brand for doing water education work, targeting primarily high school students but also the general public with the idea that folks should know enough about what are the water management challenges, what are the resources we have, why are they special, what—how are they threatened, both by over-consumption and by pollution and how they can be a citizen and—and steward of—of our area's watersheds.

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So with Barton Springs University, the last couple years we've produced one big day event at the springs. We've had about 900 high school students attend, most of them with their environmental science teachers, you know, on a field trip for a whole day of outdoor learning at the springs with teaching sessions and—and hands-on experiential learning led by, you know, academics, government experts, and, you know, private sector, nonprofit experts. We're expanding that into sort of a year round education program.

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Along the way, we've produced a number of maps and back in 2007, I believe it was, we produced the—the Hidden Heart of Texas Edwards Aquifer map that actually Sarah Mitchell made the map, but it's a fantastic guide—I'll brag on it—and it's still really the best map out there of the whole Edwards Aquifer region in—in my view.

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And highlighting some of the other critical resources, not just the water, but the endangered species, the—the caves that are available—some of them are tourism show caves, but also the other sort of under, you know, smaller caves that we need to protect as both conduits for infiltrating the water and delivering the water, but as the sort of unique underground ecosystems in their own right.

DT: I think one thing that—that you've been involved with for a good while is—is not just the—maybe the symptoms of environmental harm, you know, of water pollution or over-development of land, but the process and—and open government, open meetings processes, you know, zoning—CodeNEXT. Could you maybe touch on some of those efforts that you've been en—engaged with?

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BB: Well a whole lot of being able to advocate for environmental protection is having access to information and, in particular, you know, government documents where, you know, whether it be at local, state, or federal level, where entities that need permits or government approvals or filing their information and trying to make their case as to why, you know, their project that—that may threaten the environment needs to be approved. So we have gotten very aggressive about collecting that information under the Federal Freedom of Information Act and the state version of that the Texas Public Information Act.

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And we regularly get stonewalled. And so, you know, if we have to, we sue to try to get that information because otherwise, you know, you—you can't—you can't be an effective

advocate. As a nonprofit charitable organization, Save Our Springs Alliance, cannot get involved in candidate politics. But, as an individual and separate from my work, I have been a citizen activist trying to help elect good people to—to make good decisions as—as any citizen should as well.

01:24:46

And then there've been particular battles over using this initiative and referendum process like we used for Save Our Springs to advance measures that the elected officials, you know, just won't do. You know, there's—there's too much influence of money and politics, in my view. And that's not just in Washington or just at the state level. It's at the local level too. And so we've been involved in various initiative processes.

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Ju—just lost one last week on the CodeNEXT issue which was around the city's move to completely rewrite its land development code in a way that is supposed to implement our comprehensive plan, but the direction it was going in in—in our view, was—was not consistent with the—the—the comprehensive plan. It was trying to increase density, which is generally more efficient patterns of growth.

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But it was especially trying to force that increased density on the central city while, at the same time, allowing development in the suburbanizing, you know, green field areas on the perimeter to continue building just standard issue sprawl subdivisions rather than have that new development be in this more sort of compact and connected is the term or, you know, more walkable communities where development is clustered and is sort of the old—old of—where cities were built before we were a hundred percent dependent on the automobile.

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That's going to be—continue to be—be a battle that—that we'll be involved in as the organization. At the state level, you know, the—it's just gotten worse and worse. The Republican Party has continued its ho—hostility towards environmental protection. It shouldn't be a bipartisan—or a, you know, party—one party versus another issue but, again, since Reagan, it largely has been with the democrats not necessarily being really strong on the environment but not committed to dismantling the environmental protection laws that we do have on the books at—at the federal and state level.

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So hopefully we're starting to see that change with—with the selection from last week.

DT: You—you—you've I think struggled with the—the development pressures in Austin and really throughout the Hill Country. And I was wondering if you could talk about what population growth, in general, means for Austin I think and—and the—the changing of the community. I mean you've said that—that as more people move in here it becomes more expensive to live here. And so a lot of the old conservation community either ages out or moves on because it's, you know, they—they've just gotten to old, they've moved to an old age home or they've moved out of town, whatever. And you get new people coming in who maybe aren't aware of some of the—the conditions and the concerns of—of Austin and a lot of these towns in—in this area. Could you kind of touch on that?

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BB: So yeah, that—that growth has—is just relentless and incredibly challenging. And, you know, our Chamber of Commerce and our city continues to market Austin as this, you know, great, green light on the hill and that, you know, we're sustainable and we protect everything and it's a good reason to move here. So a lot of the mo—newcomers are very sympathetic to environmental protection and sort of think of themselves as being, you know, environmentalists. But they're not taking the next step and getting educated about the local resources.

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A lot of people moving here today are coming for a very big paycheck and that's the primary draw that—that Austin is a green city, has great live music, great Tex Mex, you know. That's—that's a plus but the draw is a big paycheck and that's completely different from seventies, eighties, nineties, when people realized I want to be in Austin. I'm willing to take a pay cut and earn less than I could make, you know, in Dallas or Denver or Houston because this is the type of community I want to live in where we have places like Barton Springs or—we have Barton Springs.

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We have live music. We have people who value, you know, culture and community over maximizing, you know, the paycheck. And so it's a tremendous challenge now. In this bond election, the—the—the 72 million dollars that was in a larger 184 million dollar proposition that included flood mitigation, water quality land, and open space protection—it passed higher than all the other measures. It was 84 percent. So the newcomers share the sentiment but they don't share the understanding of what's going on.

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And so there's not the accountability that we had at one—at one time with day-to-day decision making by our council and our staff and then also similarly at the county level. So it's—we haven't kept up. We haven't found a way to have those newcomers be educated and be engaged citizens. And even if they think of being a—in Austin for just a short period of time, that they still act like it's their home and that they have a right to vote and they have—they're—they're invested enough that—that they need to—they need to help us protect what's important about Austin rather than just come and earn the paycheck and eat at expensive restaurants until they get a better offer, you know, somewhere else.

DT: Well and you talked about people who've come here recently and you're different. You've been here for over a quarter of a century now and—and I—I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about resilience because you have been committed to a place that's important to a lot of us, but you really stake your career on it. And—and it hasn't been easy and then SOS went bankrupt at one point and you've pulled it back and put it back together again. I was just hoping you could talk about what it takes to continue on.

01:32:32

BB: [laughing] How stupid could I be? Is that the question?

DT: No, how—how—how brave and patient—yeah?

01:32:42

BB: I'm just—yeah, I'm just kidding.

DT: Yeah, yeah.

01:32:44

BB: Burnout happens but I've learned to manage it much better. I have a beautiful nine year old daughter. So I—I balance my work with family life and that's—that's also focused my attention more. So I'm a lot more effective and efficient when I am working. I al—remind myself of a saying from Robert McCurdy, who had the Clear Clean Colorado River Association many years ago and is still a—a big patron of the—the Nature Conservancy here in Texas. And he—he taught me the idea that, you know, let heartbreak be your rocket fuel.

01:33:34

That setbacks, you know, have to push you forward and—because sometimes it is hard. But we're making a difference, not as much as we should be but we're making a huge difference and so we keep doing it. And I feel incredibly lucky to be doing it. I also feel like the best work for the environment does come from people who are rooted in a particular place and that, you know, we need the big national groups to be advancing policy, you know, in congress, at the state houses.

01:34:22

But without the small groups that are really paying attention to, you know, their own neighborhood, their own watershed, their own creek, those big groups, you know, would—would not be effective at all because you can pass all the laws in the world or the policies but if it's not really being implemented, you know, acre by acre, then, you know, it—it's kind of—it's—it's—it's a— it's a mirage. It's—it's not real. So, you know, I made myself stake here and I'm staying here at least for the foreseeable future.

DT: Well you—talking about this sort of rootedness, is—is there a—a favorite place that you enjoy going to—or maybe multiple places—that just give you solace and comfort and just remind you of why you work on these things?

01:35:23

BB: Well, I mean, Barton Springs, of course, is at the top of that list. I mean, I bought this house in the mid-90s in large part because it was, you know, we're eight blocks from the springs, nine blocks, something like that. I actually got a city map and cut a string and stuck a pin in Barton Springs and drew a one-mile radius circle to—to identify, you know, where I would look for a place to live. And—and I—I'm glad I did and held onto this place because I—I couldn't afford to buy a house in this neighborhood today.

01:36:05

But Barton Springs is at the top of that list, the creek—the Green Belt is spectacular and we're so blessed to have that and then San Marcos Springs and the San Marcos River. Floating the San Marcos River in mask and snorkel is just, you know, it's magical. And I do that as often as I can and I—my daughter loves it as much as I do so, you know, we do it. And she learned to snorkel before she could learn to swim. So—because you don't have to

lift your head up and breathe.

01:36:45

You know, you can—you can stay flat and the breathing part is the hardest part of learning to swim. So literally she was a very good snorkeler before she was a good swimmer.

DT: Well speaking of—of Basia and—and, you know, young people, in general, is there some kind of a—a message that you would want to convey to younger people about why this is important, why it's valuable—the—the things that you've been doing—and how they can find some access to be engaged themselves?

01:37:25

BB: Well I think that with the threat of climate change being sort of overarching existential crisis for us as a species, folks are—are more focused on the idea of dedicating themselves to meaningful environmental protection efforts and that addressing climate change includes at home, you know, and local because we're not getting the leadership we need in Washington where, you know, the environment has gotten a tiny fraction of the charitable dollars that are out there. They mostly go to, you know, academic institutions, hospitals, those big institutions—religion, you know, churches. I think we're seeing a shift in that.

01:38:29

There's tremendous opportunity to pursue careers I believe right now in conservation. These are as a scientist or an advocate or educator. Environmental education is being integrated into corporate behavior, corporate accountability, the private sector, and to lots of other areas where, you know, folks are realizing that, you know, they're—as a Old Earth First sign on the—the abutment below, in the creek below MoPac, there's no jobs on a dead planet. So I think it's incredibly rewarding for people who want to do environmental work in—in some form or fashion.

01:39:19

It's definitely try to mentor interns and young lawyers and young environmental study students at SOS and—and outside SOS as well. And to encourage folks to, yeah, you need to make a living but you don't have to pursue the big bucks to have a rewarding, you know, life and meaningful life.

DT: One last question occurs to me and sort of based on what you said in a note a few days ago, you know, your story today is one way of getting a message out but you also work with local newspapers and radio stations and TV stations and I—I think that you had said that you have a concern about fake media and this sort of media vacuum that—that you think has—has become a problem. And I was hoping you could kind of elaborate on that.

01:40:26

BB: Yes. There's—I mean, so much fragmentation of news and then, you know, with internet and social media and so much fake news but also just distraction with every kind of distraction imaginable that's out there.

01:40:52

But we've seen a real diminishment in our local media educating people about Austin issues, environmental issues, social and economic justice issues, public health issues, that a number of us have seen that there's a real void there in that we need some sort of online or

other news source that—that serves the function that the Austin Chronicle used to serve where when they had, you know, a real focus on local affairs and then recr—including local environmental issues, which they don't have any longer and then with the Statesman just being bought out by a new, you know, big corporation that's laying off people and downscaling their local news coverage.

01:41:51

So a lot of—in a lot of cities now, you see online a news that are in a nonprofit mode that are coming together to fill that void. So I'm—I'm working with a number of other folks to try to see if we might launch a—a—a community news outlet that would not just do environmental issues but other issues and wouldn't just be a news service but would be a place where you could have online discussion that wasn't just, you know, throwing bombs but was, you know, moderated in a way that would—would be sort of productive dialogue.

01:42:35

And I just—just seeing what has happened this last election where there was so much misinformation, not just, you know, in the federal races but, you know, in the local—local issues. I just think that Austin's in big trouble if there's not something done to provide a real source of local information and local community dialogue where—we won't survive as a community without it. I don't know if we can be successful trying to do that but—but we're going to give it a try.

DT: I—I don't have anymore questions myself but I was hoping that you might have something to add or any other thoughts?

01:43:24

BB: Well the one thing that—that I have really been trying to think about and struggle with and—and it's a theme that's sort of central in—in Laura Dunn's mov—documentary The Unforeseen, is the idea of growth in that we're often attacked as no growthers but the—the arguments we've made almost always were, you know, protecting the environment is good for economic development, good for growth, in that they're compatible. But now I think with climate change and with resource depletion globally, you know, I wo—you know, there's a lot of science coming out saying, you know, we can't keep growing.

01:44:15

You can't grow forever and that there's got to be a way to come up with a way to have healthy economics so people have a living but we're not consuming our natural resources, destroying our natural resources, destroying our atmosphere in how we live. And that—that these really tough issues, growth being one of them, is something we need to talk about, you know, other than just you're for it or you're against it because we have to find a way where we—we grow in ways that aren't physical destruction of our resources.

01:45:06

And that's starts right here but it's, you know, we're a global city now and so, you know, if we're going to be an environmental leader, we—we have to think about these things and—and figure out a way to—to try to move our city to a—a way that's truly, not just sustainable growth, but sustainable survival and—but—but not stagnant—that we're growing and, you know, in arts and healthy living but not in—in consumption of land and water and resources.

DT: Sort of redefining how growth and progress?

01:46:02

BB: Yeah, yeah, and—and—and I think people are—people are questioning that this whole sort of, you know, ultra-capitalist, you know, more and faster growth is already better. People get it that there's something wrong there. But we don't know what the alternative is. And there's—there's not a clear path that takes us to something different. And so there's—there's fear. I don't know what the answer is but I th—that—that issue is out there right now and—and I think a lot of folks are—are realizing that, you know, we've got to figure out how to—how to talk about it, how to think about it.

DW: [inaudible] thought about that because we interviewed quarter of a century ago, [inaudible] I both David Brower and Paul Ehrlich [inaudible] in two days.

01:46:59

BB: Wow, interesting. Those guys are amazing.

DW: And well here's the discussion they were having in 1998. So the discussion I've just heard from you has to do with an adaptation that—in other words, growth is somehow inevitable but either the framework changes or the adaptation or the definition but understandably, both Brower and Ehrlich said the same thing...someone needs to have a sit-down with the Pope, that population, at that time, before even climate change was acknowledged—was considered by then and even Theo Colborn—we saw her like the week later but a number one issue. It wasn't about how we adapt to it or mold an economic thing. It was the too many people, in general. And I 'm wondering how the environmental movement has changed? That was seen—population was seen directly as the number one environmental problem by these leaders [inaudible] movement. Is it now we don't talk about that, we don't use that kind of language, because it seems that that's not the discussion that those same people were having a quarter of a century ago? Wh—do we dance around that as an issue in the environmental movement? I—I'm not sure. I just wonder if you've had this experience? And you can address David as the—?

01:48:12

BB: Yeah, I—I would say, you know, there's some people that focus more on population growth as being a challenge. And others are saying, you know, that there—there is a fear there of wading into, you know, cultural issues there of—of telling people they can't have children or they can only have one or two. We haven't wanted to do that as a society. And focusing on well, okay, consumption growth. Personally I think it ha—you know, we have to talk honestly about both of them. But, I mean I th—the last I heard the—the figures are, you know, a child being born in the United States will consume something like thirty times the natural resources of a child being born, you know, in Mexico or a lot of countries in Africa.

01:49:11

So, you know, I don't know too many African families or Catholic families in Latin America who are having thirty children. So, you know, it's—it's—there's—there's a challenge on both fronts, population and consumption. In my view, you know, there are too many people

on the planet and, you know, already and it keeps going up and, you know, it's starting to level off, which is a good thing. But, again, these—these issues were talked about 25 or 30 years ago but not by many.

01:49:54

And if you see in the mainstream media and the—the mainstream environmental groups, you know, are still not addressing, you know, can we really tackle climate change without tackling, you know, growth consumption, driven by, you know, our—our capitalist model of—of—of our society. So I don't know if that fully answers it. I—I know it doesn't fully answer the question but—

DT: That there may be these sacred cows or third rails or whatever the metaphor is that you just can't discuss those although they're at the root of a lot of the other symptoms, yeah.

01:50:36

BB: Well and—and on the political side—so, for years, and—and still there, you know, the third rail things you can't talk about—the three G's, you know—God, guns, and gays. Well add growth to that. I mean, the issues that we need to talk about and where I th— personally think, you know, people who are caring and loving, you know, want to figure out these issues together, you know, whether they identify themselves as conservative or liberal or libertarian or whatever, but, you know, hiding from the tough issues doesn't— doesn't get them resolved on either a personal level or, you know, as a society or, you know, as a—a global—as a species that's, you know, dictating the future of the whole planet at this point.

DT: Well tha—thanks for engaging in a [overlapping conversation] tough issues. No, it's just—this is important and thank you so much for taking this on and—and sharing with us how—how you, you know, confront these things. So thank you very much. Appreciate your time.

01:51:48

BB: Yeah.

[End of Interview with Bill Bunch - November 10, 2018]