

## LOOK UPSTREAM

DECEMBER 2007

### “Life is not waterproof”

Northwestern Harris County's Cypress Creek Watershed residents are again uniting in their uphill task to cope with storm water flooding and losses of the surrounding native forests which attracted them to live in the tranquil suburbs of Houston. Families learned home property values can fall and neighborhood quality-of-life can deteriorate due to these unfortunate consequences arising from the forces of massive ongoing growth in urban development within the watershed. Such growth often occurs miles upstream from their neighborhood subdivisions leaving them with no voice in bringing about beneficial land development regulations. However they are discovering this can be changed!

Pooling their financial resources, their political resources and legal counsel, families in neighboring subdivisions began contributing to a 50 cents-per-family-per-month voluntary donation to employ skilled professionals who carry out research and consult with local government representatives in developing solutions to reverse and/or soften the detrimental effects of these man-made problems. Named the “*Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition*”, this alliance of families and business owners has been organized to function through their neighborhood municipal utility districts and home owner associations. Their research often carried out in partnerships forged with local government officials is identifying how land development regulations, planning processes and policy can be changed to provide significant improvements. A current example exists in regulations governing floodplain land development.

Triggered by massive flooding during the 2001 Tropical Storm Allison, FEMA began remapping floodplains throughout the 22 watersheds draining Harris County's 1,800 square miles. The largest is the 320 square mile Cypress Creek watershed where unusual topography – both natural and man-made – has made it the most difficult in accurately determining the all-important 10-year, 20-year, 100-year and greater floodplain areas and depths – information lying at the very heart of, and vital to determining what regulations must be followed during development construction in order to harness the risks of worsening downstream flooding.

Research by the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition (CCFCC) found FEMA's computer-generated floodplains **were significantly under-calculated** in an area known as the “Upper Watershed”. Appeals were filed on the basis of the CCFCC research by both CCFCC and the Sierra Club. FEMA denied both appeals, then proceeded to adopt and make the flawed versions and corresponding under-calculated floodplains official beginning in June 2007. This unfortunately continues being used today as the basis for granting new land development permit applications in the exploding growth areas within this watershed. A Sierra Club law suit filed in the federal courts has not resulted in an injunction. And although the CCFCC partnership working with Harris County Flood Control

District in a team effort has uncovered the elusive causes of the problems and has resulted in acceptable solutions, other barriers must be overcome in order for the recalibrated computer modeling to be used.

The conventional federal government method followed by FEMA for replacing the flawed with the recalibrated models and corrected floodplain maps is a lengthy and drawn-out process. Left to proceed on this basis, the existing official versions will unfortunately continue to be used for another year, perhaps longer. Although this is deemed by CCFCC's officers to be unacceptable, an approach to overcome this dilemma has now been agreed by the responsible parties and only remains to be submitted to and approved by Harris County Commissioners Court.

*Look Upstream* articles are provided by CCFCC as a public service. Visit [www.ccfcc.org](http://www.ccfcc.org) for more information on needed flood protection, environmental preservation, flood insurance and membership or e-mail to [floodalliance@ccfcc.org](mailto:floodalliance@ccfcc.org).

*The Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition, a grass-roots, all-volunteer, 501(c)(3) group of local residents in Northwest Harris County. Visit their website, [www.ccfcc.org](http://www.ccfcc.org) for more information on needed flood protection, environmental preservation, flood insurance and membership. If your community is not a member, arrange to join up so that you too have public representation in these matters. There are no fees or dues – all costs are paid by voluntary contributions and grants.*

