

LOOK UPSTREAM

SEPTEMBER 2005

Wooded land donation is outstanding contribution to quality of life goals in Northwestern Harris County.

For several decades neither private developers nor local government agencies in northwestern Harris County have acquired and set aside sufficient acreage required to meet critical flood damage reduction needs and conservation of irreplaceable forests along our waterways. In an area underserved by public parks and recreation areas, such places could also serve to satisfy quality-of-life, health and recreational needs of the community.

Two unfortunate elements existing in the daily lives of residents living in Northwestern Harris County - destruction of forests and escalating flood risk - combined with the announcement by Hewlett-Packard of their pending sale of forested land adjacent to Cypress Creek triggered a grass roots undertaking early this year. Naming their group the "HP Park Alliance", their efforts resulted in the developers who purchased the property, Vincent Kickerillo and Walter Mischer (V & W) agreeing to donate 75 acres for preservation as a public nature park. This forested tract, a naturalist's dream, includes a magnificent 40 acre lake. Located adjacent to Cypress Creek this future nature park valued at over \$ 6 million is listed in some historical records as sharing in the journey of Sam Houston's army across northwestern Harris County trailing Cypress Creek where they camped on the way under the "Old Sam Houston Oak" near present Hwy. 249's crossing of Cypress Creek.

The donated land will become an anchor park in the Cypress Creek Greenway Project. In addition to working with the purchaser, the HP Park Alliance with participation by many other prominent conservation minded organizations responding to their call, simultaneously focused on making their preservation goal known to Hewlett-Packard, Harris County government, and elected officials. Eventually all worked together culminating in agreement to establish the tract as a nature park preserving the floodplains in the area free from urban development encroachment. The park will be one more piece fitting into the overall watershed master plan advocated under the stewardship of the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition.

Originally called the "Cypress Creek Parkway", the greenway concept was promoted in the 1970's by Harris County Commissioner's Court Judge Jon Lindsay for a drainage/conservation project. Its intent was twofold: to alleviate flooding and provide recreation for what would become burgeoning urban development. Within the Cypress Creek watershed builders broke ground for Westador, Huntwick, Oak Creek Village, Greenwood Forest and Cypresswood. Lakewood Forest, Wimbleton and a host of other subdivisions prepared to break ground. The quiet countryside had evolved into a suburban area of nearly 20,000 by 1970. By 1977 the population had skyrocketed to 200,000. In the Wall Street Journal an article declared the FM 1960 area to be the fastest growing residential community in the United States. (Source: *The Heritage of North Harris County published by the North Harris County Branch, American Association of University Women, November 1977*).

Life in the affluent new suburbia has been a mixed blessing for both the old and new residents. Proponents of the Cypress Creek Parkway concept envisioned a greenbelt on flood-prone land, extending the length of Cypress Creek. The chain of parks would provide non-structural flood control and a range of recreational opportunities such as hiking and biking trails, picnicking, and canoeing. Many new residents viewed the plan as an opportunity to conserve a portion of the area's natural environment which had attracted them here. Some longtime residents saw the project as a chance for a partial return to the delightful days when the creek was in its natural state and accessible for fishing and camping. The acquisition of land critical to creation of flood protection and creation of parks had started but was discontinued. Government engineering studies were followed by more engineering studies with their hydraulic analysis calculations

and land acquisition recommendations filed and gathering dust in government offices. The enjoyment of prestigious subdivisions, luxury homes, admirable school districts with swelling enrollments, convenient shopping centers, and cultural amenities has been increasingly clouded by flooded homes, flooded neighborhoods, and the trees lining our roadways falling to the onslaught of bulldozers. Efforts by many to overcome their frustration spawned by insufficient local land development regulation required to reduce steadily increasing storm water flooding have met with limited success.

United together under the name, "The HP Park Alliance", the citizens group facilitating the generous Kickerillo - Mischer land donation includes the Cypress Creek United Civic Association (CCUCA) and Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition (CCFCC) which collectively represent about 200 HOA and MUD organizations in the Cypress Creek watershed area. Other members of this alliance include the Greater 1960 Tree Alliance, the Cypress Green Coalition, Legacy Land Trust and HOA and MUD representatives and individuals in addition to those in the CCUCA and CCFCC.

The HP Park Alliance through Linn Smyth, Chair, said, "Our goal is for this to serve as a model for other developers to encourage the development of parks in their plans". Mary Jo Butler, CCUCA President said, "We applaud the extensive efforts on the part of all parties to accomplish this monumental task - one of the most outstanding examples of commercial development capturing a true vision and responsibility for not only building neighborhoods, but for developing communities in which people can proudly call home. All who live in the already established surrounding communities will also benefit from the beauty and tranquility which this Nature Park will provide".

Note: The Cypress Creek Greenway Project, a long-delayed, basic quality-of-life, environmental undertaking will protect and increase the market value of adjoining properties based on what has occurred in other prominent regional greenway developments such as Terry Hershey Park. It will need backing from volunteers throughout the hundreds of neighborhoods located in the Cypress Creek watershed. Please contact one of the HP Park Alliance representatives for more information. Jim Robertson, Tele 281-370-8243 or Linn Smyth, Tele 281-376-2150.

