

GROWING HOUSTON'S GREEN
A Discussion Roundtable hosted by CEC
on Parks, Trails and Increasing Green Space within the City Limits

Tuesday, September 18, 2012

Meeting Notes

The day began with an overview of the Bayou Greenways Initiative (BGI) by Jen Powis of Houston Parks Board

- \$2.4 billion has been invested in linear parks already.
- \$205 million needed to go in order to complete all 7 bayous with united parkland and trails.
- Total City package for bonds is \$410 million. Proposition B is the \$166 million Parks bond, \$66 million is for capital improvements in parks, and the remaining \$100 million is for bayou greenways along 7 bayous.
- These bayou greenways monies would be spent to address the gaps in the existing system and to connect them.
- Our bayou trails resemble “Cheetos” on a map – separate “chunks” that need to be linked together into a real system.
- This bond is not raising taxes.
- The non-profit community will match government funds 1:1 for greenways
- 5-7 years to complete, 10 at the maximum.
- \$20 million raised so far (one year old).
- Recently Tiger IV grant is a step in the right direction; \$15 million from the federal government to fill in gaps in the pedestrian/bike paths.
- The bond also addresses preservation and flooding issues:
 - Some bayous are natural and unpaved and need to be preserved.
 - Some near city center are channelized and part of our flood control system.
 - There are dollars included for larger green parks along the linear system that could act as detention ponds for water quality.
- Land/dollars calculation for the total project of \$205 million is roughly \$80 million land acquisition, \$15 million design, \$100 million actual construction/building.
- Big goal is to unite the system:
 - Re-envision the parks system in the city – this is not all about trails; it is really a park system.
 - In reality, this is a 100-year-old idea to create parks along the bayous and to connect them together.
 - Improve overall transportation with a linked system of Metro stops to parks and trails – 52% increase last year in the number of bikes snapped onto Metro buses, but they still need to get to the buses.
 - Better home to work commutes; connect trails to Park n Ride lots.
 - Improve air quality.
 - Safe paths to and from schools.

- Enhance aesthetics, attractiveness of urban area, and ensure bayou preservation.
- Increase recreation.
- Health benefits – get kids outdoors more, more active – save healthcare \$\$.
- Low income areas addressed as well – where the bayou goes, this bayou greenways initiative goes; equitable distribution.
- Once complete, 75% of all our population would be within a mile of a park.
- Connect City and County trails and parks - Spring, Cypress, Clear Creek, Greens Corridor.

Total City of Houston bond is \$410 million, includes libraries, public safety, etc. as well.

- Propositions A through E on the ballot.
- Will vote for each separately.
- Straight party ticket voting will NOT vote on the bonds. You will have to go ALL the WAY DOWN the ballot and affirmatively vote YES.
- Metro proposal will likely be first on ballot, followed by HISD and HCC, and before this parks bond.
- League of Women Voters may do roundtables on each proposition closer to election.

Robert Rayburn of the Energy Corridor District described their efforts in developing the West Houston Master Trails Plan. The plan was started in 2007 in partnership with the National Park Service and was developed with local residents, businesses, MUDs and users contributing more than 3,900 volunteer manhours. The plan was officially published and released in April 2011.

- The 70,000 acre plan was primarily transportation-based, but included outdoor recreation, health concerns and safety concerns.
- Wanted better communities, more connected communities.
- 2/3 of their trails map is inside the City of Houston.
- 58 MUDs were included in the subject areas and most were positive about trails, but were without an overall vision of connectivity with each other, the county's trails and the City of Houston's parks.
- Trails were built at first in bits and pieces by various entities, resembling a "bag of Cheetos on a picnic table."
- Still big gaps – need connections.
- Issues that need addressing/more focus:
 - Any significant gaps in the trail system make commuting on them impossible.
 - Failures to connect neighborhoods to park spaces, and outdoor recreational activities without sidewalks or trails along the roadways, and our publicly owned lands like our drainage ways, has helped lead to children being held imprisoned within their subdivisions.

- Every new park built by the city or the county MUST be connected to existing trails and parks or we are not making progress; we need greenways, not isolated “islands” of green.
- If the City of Houston and the county truly support the vision of transportation alternatives, commuting alternatives must be supported through a change of policy, requiring complete transportation corridors to be developed, rather than single-use automobile corridors. Simply put, we need better land-use planning.
- Needs city support for areas outside Beltway 8.
- Need to stop building across drainage ways, preventing the opportunity for future connectivity.
- Policy changes incorporating sound engineering details would help stimulate future opportunities.
- Need to opt for ledges under overpasses vs. 45-degree concrete slopes.
- The Grand Parkway road and bridge designs should be built with future cross-transportation needs supported.
- See plan online at <http://www.energycorridor.org/parks-trails-recreation/west-houston-trails-master-plan> -- it is for all to use.
- More trails continue as the partnerships between Steve Radack at the county level and MUDs continue to grow.
- Need a unified plan that includes *regional* transportation plans, trails, connectivity, preservation and conservation, flooding – needs coordination of agencies – City, County, H-GAC, TxDOT, Greater Houston Partnership, etc.
- Need to talk about maintenance up front when proposing these projects.
- There is also a Texas Trails Network – a statewide effort under way to develop a statewide plan that will require support from county to county.

Bayou Preservation Association’s efforts and concerns were also mentioned, particularly regarding the preservation and conservation of bayous, and Flo Hannah of Coastal Prairie Partnership and Houston Audubon added remarks:

- Bayous are a wildlife corridor.
- We need bayou restoration in some areas.
- Must also address water quality issues.
- Creating a trail system that utilizes the natural bayou corridors and their ecosystem, without helping develop a restored riparian greenbelt that provides improved water quality, would be a selfish use of the land.
- Must avoid creating additional runoff.
- Must design trails better to minimize erosion and added sediment deposits.
- Need native grasses, birding meadows etc. to sustain and restore bayou areas, while reducing maintenance costs of mowing, insecticides, fertilizers, etc. at the same time.
- Water quality benefit, as well as air quality benefit; good prairie absorbs pollutants, filters waterways naturally.

Barbara Jo Harwell of Hermann Park Conservancy also updated us on their recent activities and gave a big parks perspective.

- Hermann Park has a strong master plan they have stuck with and upheld, which has lead to good fundraising and success.
- Some completed Hermann Park Conservancy projects include the Reflection Pool, Lake Plaza with new miniature train station, restrooms, gift shop, café and pedal boat dock, extension of miniature train track connecting inside the Park train platforms to the Metro rail stops along Fannin.
- Renovation of 1.9 mile trail in Hermann Park included pairing North and South MacGregor to allow the old North roadbed (reclamation of 10 Park acres) to be included in the Park's trails, completing the 3-mile Hermann Park trail system.
- Project Brays addresses the 31 miles along Brays Bayou to reduce flood risk and enhance environmental and recreational elements along the bayou, including trails along the renovated bayou throughout Hermann Park from Holcombe to South MacGregor.
- Still have small pieces (Cheetos) that need to be funded and installed to complete the system along Brays through the Park.
- The new Bill Coats Bike Bridge over the bayou and the underpass under the MacGregors connect the neighbors via bike trails on the east side of the Park with the existing trails in the heart of the Park.
- Trail renovations include amenities such as drainage, light poles, and tree planting.
- Future HPC projects include 15-acre, \$30 million renovation of the Houston Garden Center site (Centennial Gardens) including 25% set-aside to a maintenance endowment.
- Grand Gateway renovation from Mecom Fountain to the Sam Houston statue, and the esplanade between Fannin and Main from Montrose to Cambridge with trails and amenities.
- Bond issue to include \$60 million for Parks with a portion to Hermann Park
- Suggested projects for bond funds for Hermann Park include Parkwide electrical system upgrade, Japanese Garden fence and pond repair, pavilions' maintenance, repair to foot bridge over McGovern Lake, drainage and irrigation for area behind Miller hill, expand parking lot at lift station along South MacGregor to accommodate dog owners at future dog park
- Need for trails connections north-south to connect east-west trails along bayous.

Peter Brown of Better Houston added his comments:

- A big part of Tiger IV's success was that it was able to show connections between transit, neighborhoods and jobs.
- Stressed the need for Complete Streets:
 - Public Works Dept. design manual is all about moving cars.

- Need to include pedestrians and bikes in the planning.
- Need different semantics to gain greater ear.
- There is no City of Houston Bike Plan.
- H-GAC is working on a bikeways plan.
- Need coordination between all.
- Should be a review process in the planning of these greenways to be sure all parts are addressed.

Additional commentary on north-south connectors using utility easements continued:

- Center Point Energy owns most of these utility easements and has offered use of their easements, but with very big requirements to use their right-of-way
 - Center Point wants absolute immunity from liability and lawsuits.
 - Power lines and poles are viewed as “attractive nuisances” – the owner is responsible for keeping people away; this can be problematic when asking for absolute immunity.
 - This issue could stall progress.
 - There is no economic benefit for Center Point, but could be good P.R. for them with the community.
 - Would Center Point require fences along trails in their easement?
- North-South easements connecting East-West bayou system all have important wildlife on these corridors.
- Choice includes natural prairies here vs. 10’ wide paved or ashtoe trail.
- Some conversation about use of esplanades along roads – will these work as connectors to parks?

BIG POINT: If our community has a broad coordinated plan and a vision, then the little pieces will start to fall into place.