

# Mitchell provided the world an example in The Woodlands

By [Nancy Sarnoff](#) August 2, 2013 Updated: August 4, 2013 6:20pm



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NY18) NEW YORK, NY JULY 24,1972 The American Stock Exchange today opened trading in the shares of common stock of Mitchell Energy & Development Corp., Houston, Texas. John R. Stern (left), a senior floor ... more

George Mitchell's legacy long will resonate with those in the energy industry, real estate and anyone with a connection to Galveston. But the impact of his work will also be felt by families across the country who may never have

heard his name.

These are families who live in master-planned communities that have been influenced by Mitchell's The Woodlands.

Real estate veterans say a number of residential developments outside of Houston modeled at least a portion of themselves after the 28,000-acre community north of Houston.

"People came from all over the world to see what we were doing. People from the Far East and Europe. But also people from the United States," said Roger Galatas, who worked for Mitchell for nearly 20 years and served as president of the company that operated The Woodlands.

Mitchell, who died July 26 at age 94, welcomed those who wanted to learn what made his development unique.

The Woodlands was launched in the early 1970s with financial assistance from the federal government through a program that offered loan guarantees to help finance so-called "new towns" that met certain social, environmental and economic objectives.

"We learned a lot from The Woodlands," said Harry Frampton, managing partner of East West Partners, a development firm in Colorado, and a former chairman of the Urban Land Institute. "When we would go there and tour, he would tell his people to share. They had a great plan and a vision and were learning as they went. George was trying to build a better place and that's very complicated. He wanted to share the lessons."

### ***'Cool things' going on***

In the late 1960s and fresh out of college, Frampton landed a job

working for Charles Fraser, a contemporary of Mitchell's known for developing South Carolina's Hilton Head Island.

"Charles said, 'You have to visit some great places that are doing some cool things,' " said Frampton, who toured three projects that were just getting off the ground: Reston, Va., Columbia, Md., and The Woodlands.

"I remember that very early tour. It was just getting started, but the vision was there," he said.

In a 2007 opinion piece in the Houston Chronicle, historian Joel Kotkin said The Woodlands may represent "the best planned, environmentally sensitive large development in the country."

Aside from preserving as much of the natural environment as possible, Mitchell's vision included making The Woodlands a place where people could live and work.

He took that mission seriously, and relocated his oil and gas company, Mitchell Energy, there from downtown's Shell building.

That was around 1979, Galatas recalled.

"It was the biggest building in The Woodlands at the time," he said.

Now, the biggest building is a 30-story tower occupied by Anadarko Petroleum Corp. A second tower is underway to house the growing company.

A testament to his vision, Mitchell's original plan for The Woodlands continued to be implemented even after he sold it in the late 1990s.

He intentionally left a 1,000-acre parcel near the entrance of The Woodlands

for a commercial district. Others recognized the value.

"Many developers would have developed that first because it was closest to the highway and most accessible," Galatas said. "But George saw a bigger picture and he saw a town center that would serve not only The Woodlands but all of north Houston."

### ***'Thoughtful planning'***

That area now is home to a regional mall and other retail, a meandering waterway, a performing arts center and numerous office buildings.

Frampton, who served on an advisory committee of The Woodlands when it was later owned by Crescent Real Estate Equities and Morgan Stanley, noted the irony of its success next to a city without zoning.

"Houston always had the reputation that anything goes and planning is bad" he said. "Now here comes somebody who takes a large piece of land and does just the opposite. ... I think the market spoke and said, 'We do want some thoughtful planning.' "