

George's Coffee Club | Community Impact Newspaper

July 13, 2016



George Mitchell (left), Merlyn Christie (center) and Johnny Mitchell ran a petroleum exploration firm called Oil Drilling in the 1960s.

More than 40 years since The Woodlands opened, several longtime residents have started a monthly coffee club whose goal is to discuss the community's history and George Mitchell's legacy.

Roger Galatas, former president of The Woodlands Corporation, Tom Cox, former custom homebuilder, and Jeff Harris, former senior vice president of administration for The Woodlands Corporation, started the club in January to honor, respect and communicate Mitchell's vision.

"We're not trying to get anyone elected into office; we're not trying to promote anything; we're just trying to share information we know about [The Woodlands' history]," said Galatas, president and CEO of Roger Galatas

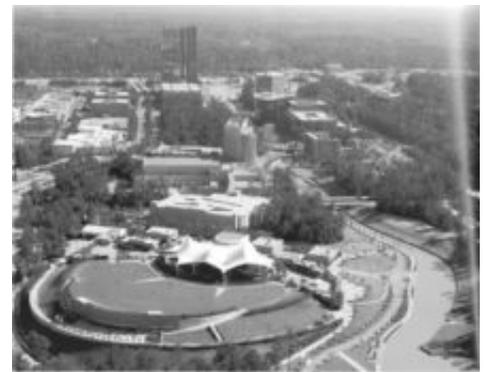
Interests and author of “The Woodlands: The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown. “Hopefully, it will be useful to somebody.”

The 35-member group meets on the third Wednesday morning of each month at The Woodlands Country Club. Guest speakers are invited to discuss various topics, such as education, health care, the environment, personal safety and economic development, and how far The Woodlands has come in establishing these concepts in the community.

“People here did things on faith in belief in George’s vision,” Galatas said. “That’s what kept them inspired. George’s vision was well-articulated. That’s what we’re trying to do, too.”



Mitchell and his wife Cynthia Woods Mitchell attend The Woodlands 10th anniversary party.



The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion is an anchor in The Woodlands for events.



Roger Galatas, shown with his wife Ann, was named president of The Woodlands Corporation in 1986.

Preserving history

When Mitchell embarked on his plan for The Woodlands in the 1960s, it was not without a struggle, Harris said.

“We didn’t have the financial results to go off our history, so we had to paint a picture to our banks about the future,” Harris said. “We had a 20-year plan. I presented this 20-year plan that said that we would have about 120,000 people living in The Woodlands, and there would be high-rise condominium housing. The banker ... laughed at my presentation. He said there was no way that would ever occur. You can imagine what kind of hurdles we had to attract capital to this swamp, really. It was that very beginning hard work that set the stage for what you can see today.”

Club member Bruce Tough, former chairman for The Woodlands Township, grew up watching The Woodlands take shape. He agreed the community would not be what it is today without the dedication Mitchell and the people he recruited to start the community showed in the beginning.

Galatas said the influx of people moving to The Woodlands each year has diminished knowledge of the community’s history.

“The one thing I would like to emphasize is thousands of people move to The Woodlands every year who don’t have a clue about [the history],” Galatas said. “It’s not their fault. One objective is to share this information with newcomers.”

Club member Mary Matteson-Parrish, a retired real estate agent and former Lone Star College trustee, has been a resident of The Woodlands since 1973.

She worked with The Woodlands Development Company when The Woodlands Resort—then The Woodlands Inn—was under construction.

“Even in my small role in the world, we were all so enamored of what was being created here,” Matteson-Parrish said. “I’ve never quite gotten over that. Even to this day, with all the stuff that’s going on, it’s just amazing to me.”

Club member Shannon Altieri moved to The Woodlands 11 years ago from Amarillo and has worked with Galatas for eight years.

“When we moved here, I remembered seeing the license tags that said, ‘The Hometown,’ and it felt like that,” Altieri said. “I don’t always feel like you get that anymore. The amenities, everybody loves, and they’re great. We wouldn’t want to be without them, but just to go out and see people that you know [is] very rare.”

Looking forward

Club member Dan Hauser, resident of The Woodlands since 1979 and retired regional manager for Woodforest National Bank, said township leaders will have to take over expressing Mitchell’s vision, making the history of The Woodlands that much more important to communicate.

“I’d like to see that decisions are made not by emotion, but by facts and by planning,” Hauser said. “We didn’t do everything that George wanted. He got turned down four or five times on certain things, and he’d look for an alternative.”

Tough said he feels the growth of The Woodlands was a team effort, and people were willing to negotiate hurdles that stood in the way. He said the future of The Woodlands is in the hands of the community’s leaders.

“Ten years from now, we will be a city,” Tough said. “It will be a different entity. Whether the preservation and the integrity of The Woodlands is maintained will be up to that governmental entity.”

Harris said he remains optimistic about the future of the master-planned community model.

“This will evolve, and it will work,” Harris said. “[The Woodlands] will be a catalyst for growth in this area.”

Although the members of George’s Coffee Club have their work cut out for them spreading Mitchell’s message to The Woodlands, residents also have the opportunity to absorb and share this information.