

Robert Heineman | Community Impact Newspaper

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For the last 45 years, Robert Heineman has been instrumental in planning many aspects of The Woodlands that are major fixtures in the community today.

“The Woodlands was a real challenge, dealing with all these environmental factors and how to structure a city out of a forest,” Heineman said. “That’s what the challenge has been: dealing with each element that comprises a city.”

Alex Sutton, co-president of The Woodlands Development Company, said Heineman has been a vital part of the planning and development of The Woodlands since its inception.

“Robert is a true visionary of The Woodlands, helping to shape the community from preliminary drawings to one of the most successful master-planned communities in the nation and the hometown we all enjoy today,” he said. “He stays true to George Mitchell’s vision, and in my view, is the conscience of The Woodlands for development.”

Heineman, who had interests in art, science and math from a young age, first learned about planning and urban design while studying architecture at Rice University.

“We had an urban design project under [architect] Denise Scott Venturi at Rice, and I found it fascinating,” he said. “I became interested in not just individual buildings, but groups of buildings and cities.”

After graduation in the early 1970s, Heineman enrolled in graduate school at Harvard University to further his knowledge of architecture. It was then he first heard about The Woodlands.

“My parents sent me an article in the paper about George Mitchell and his plans for The Woodlands, a new community outside Houston,” Heineman said. “I wrote [the company] asking if they were interested in an intern and they said, ‘Sure, come on down.’”

Heineman arrived in Houston to work for the Mitchell Energy and Development Corporation in 1971, three years before The Woodlands opened.

“That summer, the planning staff was two of us—Bob Hartsfield and me,” Heineman said. “We were beginning to put together the plan for The Woodlands that would be submitted to [the Department of Housing and Urban Development] as part of the new communities program.”

Heineman began working full time for The Woodlands in 1972 after graduating from Harvard. He was charged with helping to fulfill Mitchell’s

vision for The Woodlands: maintaining the image and qualities of the natural environment after development.

“One way [we achieved the vision] was creating forested preserves along major roadways and collectors,” Heineman said. “If you do that, your major thoroughfares are parkways rather than shopping centers.”

Heineman was also responsible for writing the first residential standards in the 1970s and coordinated the first commercial standards for the community as well. Working with businesses could sometimes be a challenge, Heineman said, since they were used to having large signs and a location visible from the street. Such was the case when McDonald’s wanted to open a restaurant in the Village of Panther Creek.

“We told [the owner people] probably won’t see the building, but there will be a sign,” Heineman said. “He finally agreed to do it, and within a short amount of time his McDonald’s was the second-highest grossing McDonald’s in the Houston area.”

Heineman also played a large role in the development of Town Center, which he first sketched out on an index card in 1972. The 44-year-old drawing mirrors a close resemblance to what has become Town Center today with both residential and office space depicted, along with a transit corridor in the middle, which became the Woodlands Waterway.

“From the beginning The Woodlands wasn’t designed like a bedroom community,” Heineman said. “It was designed as a major employment center where you could live and work. In that respect, it was different from Kingwood and Clear Lake and other developments in Houston that were residential-oriented.”

Heineman said although Mitchell would have been successful building the Village of Grogan's Mill where the Town Center is today, it would have eliminated the potential for a downtown area.

“The Town Center—the hole in the donut—was held out despite a lot of folks saying, ‘That land is so accessible, you should be developing it soon,’” he said. “It would have been most economical to develop and build a road off the freeway and put a supermarket where Anadarko is now. That was the philosophy back then: to minimize upfront costs.”

The completion of The Woodlands Mall in 1994 marked the beginning of commercial growth and bringing jobs to The Woodlands, Heineman said. However, it took about two decades for employment centers to take shape.

“People talked about The Woodlands being south of Dallas back then,” he said. “It was a long way away [from Houston]. The jobs and commercial development followed the residential development. You had to create the base.”

Since the early days of The Woodlands, employees have traveled across the country and world to study similar developments and learn from them and apply those concepts to The Woodlands.

“We’ve never rested on our laurels by saying that what we did back in ’72 was the epitome and we should never deviate from that,” Heineman said. “We always try to improve and learn from what works and learn from others. A city is always changing, it never stays still.”