

Houston Chronicle Roger Galatas helps link the past, present and future of The Woodlands

As The Woodlands marks its 40th year, few come close to telling story behind the community better than Roger Galatas

By Lindsay Peyton | October 14, 2014

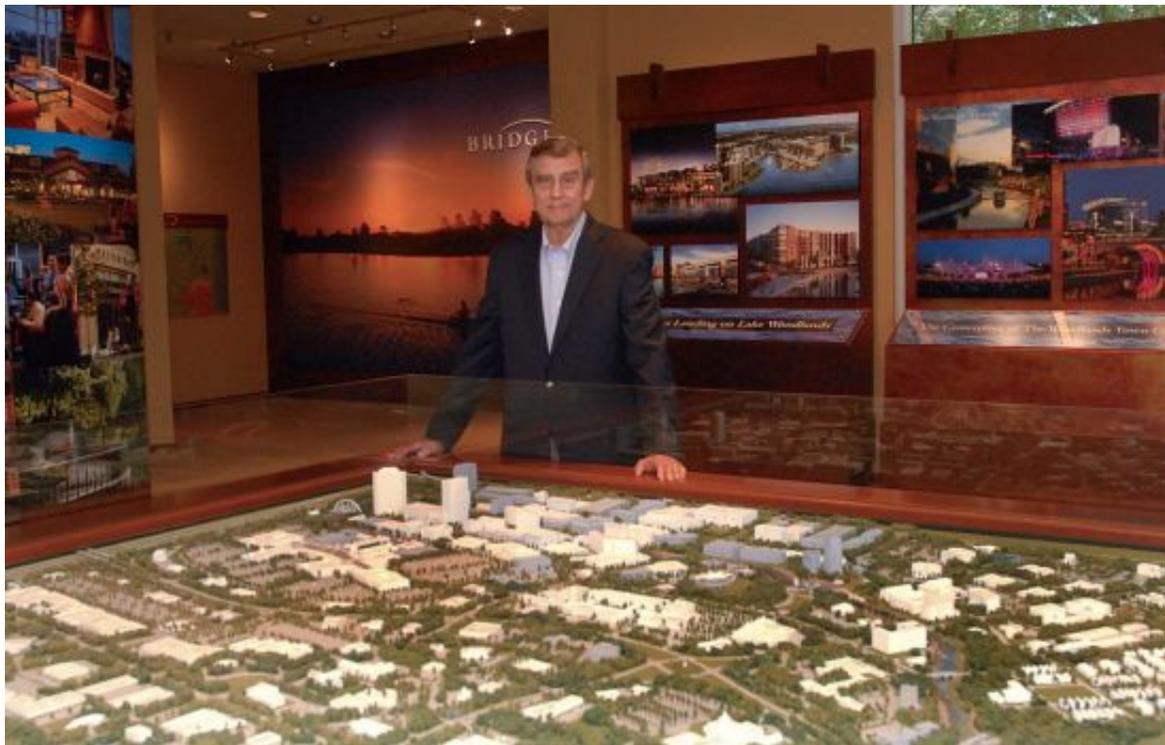


Photo By David Hopper/freelance

Roger Galatas looks over a small-scale model of The Woodlands at The Woodlands Information Center. Galatas served as president and CEO of The Woodlands Operating Co., directing all the company's real estate activities during its infancy.

When Roger Galatas drives around his hometown of The Woodlands, his view

is deeper than the houses and businesses tucked among trees.

"I can see things differently," he said. "I know how it looked at one time, how it changed, how decisions were made and the great people who were part of it all."

For the past 25 years, Galatas has led his company Roger Galatas Interests, providing advisory and development services to owners, investors and developers of major land holdings. He specializes in master-planned developments.

He learned how to develop a community firsthand - in one of the most unusual ways.

Galatas served as president and CEO of The Woodlands Operating Co., directing all the company's real estate activities during its infancy. He was a major player - from the ground up - in the creation of a community that has become internationally recognized.

Galatas said it all started in 1973 at a tee-ball game. He and his wife Ann, who were living in River Plantation in Conroe, took their son to play a game at Lamar Elementary School.

"I could hear a bulldozer in the forest, and I asked someone, 'What's happening out there?'" Galatas said. "It was the first time in my life I heard the name George Mitchell."

Mitchell had started an independent oil and gas company, Mitchell Energy and Development. He had purchased land and was hard at work developing his vision of an ideal city.

"George Mitchell, in my opinion, is the single most important factor in the success of The Woodlands," Galatas said. "It was his vision, his tenacity, his

compassion and his willingness to take on a substantial financial risk."

Galatas said Mitchell had toured the country and was aware of struggling economies in major U.S. cities.

"He thought, 'There has to be a better way to build a community and avoid these problems,'" Galatas said. "Then, he set about doing it."

Galatas, a geologist and former Air Force meteorologist, worked for Humble Oil, which became Exxon Mobil Corp. The company had moved him into their former land development arm, Friendswood Development.

One day, he got a call from a headhunter saying that George Mitchell was looking to hire someone.

"Little did I know that tee-ball would lead to my new career," Galatas said. "I came in 1979 and stayed for 20 years. It was a great experience."

Galatas was responsible for the full range of business activities and strategic planning for the 28,000-acre development, marketing, management and financial performance of all Mitchell Energy's assets.

"George Mitchell wanted to build a community where people could live, work, play and learn," Galatas said. "That was our guiding principle. Our mission that George gave us was to save the trees. It was pretty simple - and we can still enjoy that today."

During his 20-year tenure, the company's financial position improved from an operating loss to an annual operating profit of \$30 million.

"The growth has been phenomenal," he said. "Everything was well-thought through, and added value to our community. For George Mitchell, no problem was too big, and no detail was too small."

Galatas has been directly involved in the creation of several unique elements within The Woodlands, including the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, Lake Woodlands, The Woodlands Hospital (before it was purchased by Memorial Hermann) and the first college preparatory school in the area, the John Cooper School.

Galatas was a founding director and coordinated the development of The Woodlands Hospital, then served on the board of the Memorial Hermann Hospital System. He also was a founding director of the John Cooper School and president of the board of trustees of the Conroe Independent School District. A new elementary school in The Woodlands was named in his honor.

Galatas left his post at The Woodlands Operating Co., when the company was sold in 1997 - and stayed on for another two years to guide the transition.

"When I left, I thought, 'This is such a remarkable story,'" Galatas said. "I thought, 'Someone needs to write this down.'"

He recruited writer Jim Barlow - and the two spent the next three years writing "The Woodlands, the Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown."

The book sold out when it hit the shelves in 2005 - but is still available digitally on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Bruce Tough, chairman of the Township's board of directors, said that Galatas has been a major figure in the formation of The Woodlands.

"He was the last president of The Woodlands Development Co. to work with George Mitchell," Tough said. "It was a very significant and critical transition from privately owned to a corporate ownership. He was there at such a critical time in The Woodlands history."

Tough said that Galatas made an impact.

"He definitely has our gratitude for what he's done," Tough said. "He allowed for the creation of what we have now. He believes in the vision of George Mitchell - and that's what makes The Woodlands what it is, the continuation of that mission."

Galatas has now been a resident of the Village of Panther Creek since 1986. His two children and four grandchildren also live in the area.

His resume shows his continued interest in building communities. Galatas is engaged at the national level in efforts to achieve a balance between environmental objectives and economic growth, serving as chair of the Urban Land Institute's Environmental Forum, as well as a trustee and officer of the organization's Real Estate Advisory Committee of the Trust for Public Land.

He is also on the board at Biltmore Farms and Greater Houston Health Information Exchange and the advisory council for Center for Houston's Future.

Galatas also served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Grand Parkway Association, a transportation agency of the Texas Department of Transportation.

With Roger Galatas Interests, he has been actively involved in the development of Kingwood and Woodlake, as well as in the creation of resorts in Galveston Island, Aspen and Steamboat Springs.

Galatas remains dedicated to telling the story of The Woodlands.

"It's been a remarkable experience," he said. "But so many people who live in The Woodlands don't know its history."