

The Woodlands History

THE WOODLANDS, THE INSIDE STORY OF CREATING A BETTER HOMETOWN

The Education Building Block

By Roger Galatas

Successful master-planned communities provide quality educational opportunities within the community. Families with school-age children want to locate in communities with great neighborhood schools. Companies want their employees to have access to continuing education and job training programs. Master-planned communities attract people and corporations who support schools with participation and an expanding tax base. Neighborhood schools encourage parent participation and reduce transportation costs for the district. Of course, the real winners are the students who benefit from a safe, challenging, learning environment.

The Woodlands concept embraced the full range of educational objectives. Much effort went into fostering a system that would include high quality public schools, private schools and institutions of higher education. There were disappointments, but in the end, the vision has succeeded.

When Mitchell bought land for The Woodlands, it was without regard to school district boundaries. It was just land available for sale that had some proximity to I-45. For the most part it was in Montgomery County and in two school districts with the Conroe Independent School District (CISD) having jurisdiction over the east, and the first developed half of The Woodlands (generally east of Kuykendahl Road). The Magnolia Independent School District (MISD) half was to the west.

Conroe ISD shared Mitchell's vision and committed to build a high school for The Woodlands before the new town opened. Mitchell made an arrangement with then-superintendent of the schools, J.L. "Mac" McCullough, to provide a 50-acre site for the high school. The site was deep in the woods. The first trip the members of the Conroe school board made to inspect the site was in a marsh buggy; there was no road to the property.

Mitchell agreed to provide access and utilities before the school opened, including a bridge across Panther Creek, which required a substantial capital outlay. This was during 1974 when cash flow was a problem for The Woodlands Corporation. As the story goes, McCullough threatened bodily harm to Mitchell if he didn't get the bridge built across Panther Creek in time for the school to open. While that's

probably an overstatement, McCullough was more than a little upset. Here was a brand new high school nearing completion with no road access. The road and bridge were completed just before school opened. The school was named for McCullough.

For the first 10 to 12 years of operation, the corporation successfully developed within CISD. As development advanced toward the Magnolia Independent School District (MISD) it became apparent that we had to address a pending problem in timely delivery of public education. While MISD is a good school district, it didn't then have financial resources to expand its physical plant in a timely way. It was obvious that growth of The Woodlands was going to be hampered because we would be moving into a new school district whose physical school plant was located at least a 45-minute bus ride away from homes to be built.

State law as it existed at that time did not easily accommodate the change of a school boundary. We successfully worked with our legislative representatives to amend state law to allow the school boundary change, and then we had to gain approval of each district. There was one additional hurdle – a financial one. The new law required that if land is detached from one district, in this case Magnolia, then the district annexing that land, Conroe, would be required to reimburse Magnolia for its loss of tax base.

After many public meetings in each district, including several late night sessions, both districts did vote to approve the boundary change, and The Woodlands Corporation agreed to assume Conroe's obligation to pay Magnolia for its loss of tax base. The compensation finally agreed upon was \$12,000,000, payable to Magnolia at the rate of \$500,000 per year. An extensive economic study demonstrated



Sam Ashe School (So. of FM 242 & I-45)

Long before The Woodlands appeared on the scene, a portion of the land it now occupies was owned by the Grogan Cochran Lumber Company, which operated the Tamina Sawmill. The Sam Ashe School served mill workers' children from 1917 to 1927.

Photo courtesy of Jim and Wanda Cochran



The John Cooper School Graduation

The first graduation at The John Cooper School was held in May 1994. In attendance were Board Chair Warren Butler, Roger Galatas, Headmaster Marina Ballantyne, President George H.W. Bush, George Mitchell, Cynthia Mitchell and members of faculty and staff. A secret service agent is in the background... can you spot him?

to Conroe that continued efficient residential development of The Woodlands upon lands it annexed from Magnolia would support the commercial development of Town Center, and its related tax value would accrue to CISD. As it turned out, everyone was a winner. All projections about residential growth and expansion of the commercial base have come true. Had not that school boundary adjustment been made, The Woodlands would be very different today.

While Conroe ISD has excellent programs, Mitchell felt a top-quality private school was also needed in The Woodlands. Recruiting companies to move to The Woodlands, particularly biotechnology companies and venture capitalists, would be easier if we had a private college preparatory school to complement the public school system.

So when John Cooper retired as the headmaster of Kincaid School, one of the top private schools in Houston, Mitchell convinced him to move to The Woodlands and be an ex-officio advisor in the formation of a private school.

I got the opportunity to work with Cooper and engaged the help of Joel Deretchin and others within the Company. We formed a non-profit corporation and recruited a board of directors from leaders in the community. Mitchell agreed to donate the 40-acre school site and \$2 million dollars to build the first classroom building. The John Cooper School opened in 1988, and the first graduation ceremony was in 1994 with former President George H.W. Bush delivering the commencement address to a class of 25.

Mitchell was not as successful in his original move to locate a college campus in The Woodlands. In 1971, before

development of the new community, Mitchell formally offered the University of Houston (UH) 400 acres of free property in The Woodlands, upon which the University would locate a branch campus. Talks continued off and on with UH for years but finally ended in frustration brought on by bureaucratic roadblocks. Ironically, the proposed campus site rejected by UH was located on what would later become the very valuable east shore of Lake Woodlands as it was constructed.

Having lost the battle for UH, we focused our attention on getting a community college campus for The Woodlands. That effort was successful as community leaders in both Conroe and The Woodlands joined to gain voter approval to allow the North Harris Community College (later renamed Lone Star College System) to expand its jurisdiction to cover the entire CISD. A 100-acre campus acceptably located midway between Conroe and The Woodlands was acquired from the

Corporation and an architecturally attractive 4,000-student community college campus opened in 1995 with then Governor George W. Bush in attendance.

Later, with encouragement from Mitchell, the Community College, working with six universities, including UH, created a University Center to provide the final two years of undergraduate study resulting in a college degree program (the first two years provided by the Community College). The Woodlands Corporation donated 10 acres of land and \$2 million toward the construction of the 70,000 sq. ft. University Center that opened in 1998 as one of only three such centers in the U.S.



Roger Galatas

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North Harris Montgomery Community College

Located on a 100-acre campus acquired from The Woodlands Corporation, the North Harris Montgomery Community College campus opened in 1995. Continuing education and technology training programs have played an important role in business development and job creation in The Woodlands community. Photo courtesy of The Woodlands Operating Company, LP/Ted Washington

