

# The Woodlands History

THE WOODLANDS, THE INSIDE STORY OF CREATING A BETTER HOMETOWN

## The Vision and Its Building Blocks

By Roger Galatas

George Mitchell's vision for developing The Woodlands as a major master-planned community continues to be the guiding light for its success. But in the early 1970s, the ideas and concepts behind The Woodlands were so new they required time and effort to develop, so the learning process required adjustment. Mitchell and his team worked over the years to more clearly define key elements of the vision and to establish the building blocks upon which The Woodlands' success was achieved. I believe the vision can be fairly stated today as "a real hometown for people and companies where one can live, work, play, shop and learn." Its building blocks include health care, community governance, religious opportunity, education, jobs within the community, transportation and mobility, visual and

performing arts, a range of housing opportunities, competitive sports, respect for the natural environment, a relationship of trust with regulatory agencies and the active participation by individuals and companies who choose to locate here and contribute to community quality.

First let's explore respect for the natural environment and the role it plays in community building. Future articles will cover other building blocks.

When the first home buyers, proudly known as "the pioneers," came to The Woodlands late in 1974, they found the beginnings of a new town that seemed very different from other real estate developments in the Houston area. Certainly the plan had the usual streets, thoroughfares, houses and shopping areas. The difference was how all those elements fit together. The Woodlands'

designers showed a respect for the environment and social interaction for residents not seen before.

The most striking feature of The Woodlands came about because of the decision to preserve the forest and make its name more than just real estate hype. From the very first, planners set aside 25 percent of the total land area (the HUD agreement required 23 percent) and declared it off limits for building. These lakes, golf courses, forest preserves, parks and natural wooded buffers between man-made developments gave The Woodlands a very different look than the typical suburban development.

Among the original consultants hired by George Mitchell was famed ecologist, landscape architect and urban planner Ian McHarg, chairman of the University of Pennsylvania's Department

### Woodlands Parkway



#### Early Woodlands Parkway

In 1973, construction of The Woodlands Parkway illustrates the early commitment to establishing forest preserves and wooded medians along major thoroughfares. Ian McHarg, pictured left, chairman of the University of Pennsylvania Department of Landscape and Regional Planning and author of the seminal *Design With Nature*, was selected as environmental consultant for George Mitchell's planning team. McHarg had significant influence on the preservation and integration of natural resources into the development guidelines for The Woodlands.

Pictures courtesy of The Woodlands Operating Company, LP/Ted Washington

of Landscape and Regional Planning. He had a huge impact on Mitchell's vision for The Woodlands. His book, *Design With Nature*, was considered by many as the best blueprint around for designing new communities with the least impact on the natural landscape. McHarg was, to put it lightly, not beloved among many developers. In his book he railed that developers often put profit before nature. In person, the Scottish-born McHarg, with his tweed jackets and bushy mustache, could be intimidating. He was known for his often flowing pronouncements on the perfidy of man against nature.

Despite his views, or perhaps because of them, Mitchell liked McHarg, and that was what counted. The same could not be said of all the members of The Woodlands team. They had looked, with some trepidation, at other parts of his book where he described developers like themselves as people whose ethos "sustains the slumlord and the land rapist, the polluters of rivers and the atmosphere." But they, and especially Mitchell, saw that heeding McHarg would offer pluses as well as minuses. They believed that by preserving much of the natural forest and underbrush that covered the land, they could use its existence as a tremendous selling point. In 1975, McHarg told a reporter for *The Washington Post*, "In The Woodlands they found they could love profits and trees at the same time."

While McHarg's concept of "saving trees and understory" and Mitchell's

support of that plan had a profoundly positive impact on market acceptance, other parts of his environmental plan were modified or discarded. For example, McHarg conceived a network of pedestrian paths constructed of wood chips. Instead, when built they were paved with concrete or asphalt, which proved to be more durable for walking and jogging. The natural drainage system as envisioned by McHarg was modified to provide streets with curbs and guttering rather than an open ditch drainage within residential

street trees are planted along commercial corridors rather than preservation of a forest preserve, as has been done along major thoroughfares.

Additional environmental initiatives have been advanced by The Woodlands Development Company and community, including reduction in auto trips by organized car pools, van pools, park and ride facilities, walkable neighborhoods and jobs close to home. Curbside recycling is now commonplace. Shared parking reduces the number of paved lots.

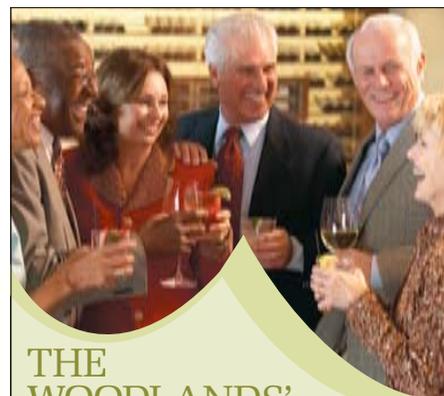


### Roger Galatas

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neighborhoods. Retention of rainwater within low spots on individual home sites was replaced with improved drainage to accommodate kids who wanted to use the yard for play and to minimize breeding spots for mosquitoes. The concept of porous paving within parking lots proved to be impractical at that time and was not pursued. The original idea of a multitude of small detention areas with check dams over much of The Woodlands was replaced instead with a lesser number of strategically located reservoirs with greater capacity to better control flooding. As Town Center has become more urbanized,

We have seen a common sense evolution of development practices to make The Woodlands a real hometown for people and companies while maintaining respect for the environment.



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