

The Woodlands History

THE WOODLANDS, THE INSIDE STORY OF CREATING A BETTER HOMETOWN

Town Center Emerges from Vision to Reality

By Roger Galatas

Postponing gratification is often a wise move in business, if you can do it. When George Mitchell and his team planned The Woodlands they resisted the temptation to develop the 1,200-acre tract of land that fronted on Interstate 45. It had the easiest access to the highway. Conventional suburban planning at the time would have used a good portion of that land for housing. That would have provided the least expensive way to develop. There would be no need for constructing extensive roadways to bring potential residents deep into The Woodlands. The Mitchell team instead reserved that land close to the interstate for a long-range payoff. It would stay vacant until both The Woodlands and the areas north and south of it along the highway would have a sufficient resident base to support commercial development. Then the land, dubbed the Town Center, would become the major business and urban-style commercial area for southern Montgomery and northern Harris counties.

The Woodlands Mall Grand Opening

More than 50,000 people visited The Woodlands Mall during its grand opening in October 1994.

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

Robert Heinemen, one of the original planners of The Woodlands, said there was no doubt that reserving this choice freeway location for future commercial development would add more long-term value to the community.

Town Center was planned to be a regional center of commerce for all of the North Houston region, including its population of one million people who today live within 20 miles of The Woodlands. The Woodlands' plan sought to avoid the problem of having non-residents drive through residential areas to get to major shopping areas or job locations. So the planning concept was to locate our Town Center at the external edge of The Woodlands fronting on Interstate 45. That gave it the best accessibility to the region's population but also conveniently close to the residential villages of The Woodlands.

By the 1980s, the delay of gratification came to an end. The development of Town

Center got underway then and will likely continue for 15 more years from now. Eventually, there will be some 18 million square feet of commercial space in Town Center, roughly equal to the downtown of Kansas City. That includes the property set aside for office, retail, entertainment, hospitality, health care, urban residential and mixed-use development.

One of the most striking features of Town Center today is The Woodlands Waterway®. Over the years, the Waterway went through a series of planning changes, according to Heineman. "That sketch I did on the back of an envelope in '72 wasn't the waterway," he said. "It was the drainage corridor through the middle of Town Center." Later plans depicted a linear park with a series of water features rather than a continuous waterway. "That evolved into a transportation corridor over time because of the availability of federal grant funds for transportation programs," said Heineman. But the idea of the Waterway was a dream on a map for years.

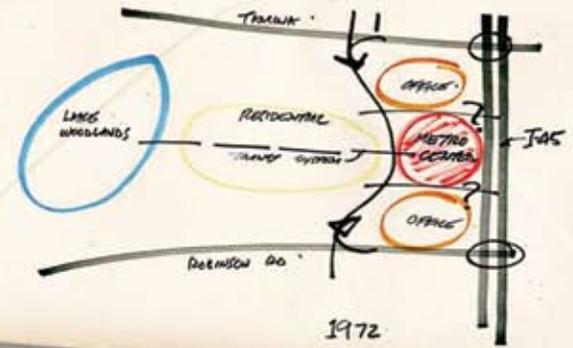
While The Woodlands Corporation figured out just what to do with the Waterway, the corridor served mainly as a drainage way. "The idea was to take a drainage ditch and turn it into a linear park, which would also serve as a transportation corridor," said Heineman. "We had to look at transportation as more than just getting from point A to point B because (for that) you can't beat the car usually. So you have to make it festive and entertaining."

Through the years since 1972, Heineman has been a champion of the evolving Waterway, as was Dick Browne, who headed The Woodlands' planning department for a number of years. Browne was a more vocal supporter and challenged others to understand its value to the community. Heineman was also very effective in his more subdued,



Original Town Center

This diagram “on the back of an envelope” by Robert Heineman in 1972 depicts an early concept of a transit corridor that would serve a multi-use downtown in The Woodlands. The idea of a transit corridor has evolved over the years from a drainage ditch into a linear park/pedestrian and transit corridor, known as “The Woodlands Waterway®.” Heineman, who joined The Woodlands Development team in 1972 had just completed his master’s degree in architecture and urban design at Harvard and had written a graduate paper on public transportation in master planned communities, thus his interest in the subject. Earlier in 1967 as a summer school student, he shared a rental home in Georgetown with Bill Clinton. Heineman continues to serve as vice president of planning for The Woodlands Development Company.



professional approach. It was Heineman who understood and spoke the language of transportation planners within local and federal agencies that reviewed and approved transportation grants. Securing federal grants was the key to constructing the Waterway. Thus far, about \$20 million in grants have been used to build and equip the Waterway.

As we looked around the country for successful examples of waterway development, the San Antonio Riverwalk stood out. It is the biggest tourist attraction in the state—bigger than the Alamo—as irreverent to Texans as that might sound.

The firm of Ford, Powell and Carson Architects had been a principal planner and advisor to the San Antonio Riverwalk for many years, so it was obvious their talent could help plan the Waterway in The Woodlands. We did not want to copy what had been done in San Antonio. We wanted to understand what made it successful—things such as the width and depth of the water, width and location of sidewalks, height and design of bridges, function and shape of public areas, landscaping, lighting and the correct interface between businesses and the Waterway. Learning from others has great value.

In the late 1990s, construction finally started on the initial one-and-a-half-mile segment of the Waterway, extending from The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion on the west to the mall on the east with water cruisers on the Waterway and motorized trolley cars along its adjacent trolley way to move people from one end of Town Center to the other. The Waterway itself already provides a pleasing visual element and an important economic development tool for Town Center.

From the beginning, the major anchor for Town Center was a regional shopping mall. But planning for a mall and actually getting it proved to be a formidable task

made difficult by a major economic downturn in the mid '80s, long-term commitments by major retail anchors to existing malls to the south of our location and limited direct access to Interstate 45.

We installed a large sign on Interstate 45 proudly pointing out that a new regional mall would soon be built. The sign was repainted every year for a decade. We felt a crisp clean sign was better than an old faded one. It was a joke throughout the county that the biggest item in our budget was paint for the sign. We changed the sign message from time to time, but it was always something about “Coming Soon, the Regional Mall.”

Finally, we reached a workable joint venture agreement with Homart, the mall development arm of Sears, and The Woodlands Mall opened in 1994 with great fanfare and a huge crowd estimated at 50,000 in attendance. As we arrived by car for the mall’s opening event and walked through the crowd, people were actually tugging at George Mitchell’s coat sleeve to get his attention and saying their thanks for bringing the mall to The Woodlands; a promise kept. It was almost a love fest on opening day.

Town Center Improvement District was formed by a special act of the state legislature in 1994 (and later renamed the Township with a fully-elected board and expanded powers provided by amended legislation) to provide a community governance structure and a coordinated marketing and economic development effort. In 2000, the initial Waterway Plaza office building was completed.

As the beginning of the 21st century approached, a landmark agreement was negotiated with Anadarko Petroleum Company to relocate its corporate headquarters, with some 2,000 jobs, from Greenspoint to The Woodlands. Under that agreement, Anadarko would acquire a site in Town Center and construct its headquarters building here on the condition that The Woodlands Development Company construct or cause the construction of a full-service corporate hotel nearby for business visitors and corporate meetings. The deal was struck and the 30-story Anadarko Tower, the tallest building between Houston and Dallas, was occupied in 2002. The Woodlands Waterway Marriott Hotel and Convention Center was constructed and opened for business later that year with financial support provided by Town Center Improvement District to construct the conference center meeting space and parking garage. Tax benefits were granted to Anadarko by Montgomery County as an additional incentive to encourage this important corporate relocation. The hotel has also served as an asset to encourage other corporate moves to Town Center including Chevron Phillips Chemical Company, U.S. Oncology, Huntsman Chemical and others.

Today, some 47,000 jobs are located in The Woodlands with most located in Town Center or its adjacent neighbor, the Research Forest. All made possible in part by George Mitchell’s vision, a sketch on the back of an envelope, a lot of hard work by dedicated professionals, significant corporate commitments and support of community residents. With a team like that, the future looks bright!



Roger Galatas

Roger Galatas is the former president of The Woodlands Corporation and the author, with Jim Barlow, of the popular book, *The Woodlands, The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown*. For more information, please visit www.rgiwoodlands.com.