

George Mitchell's legacy lives on in The Woodlands as community nears 50 years

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George Mitchell, Chairman and CEO of The Mitchell Family Corporation, is seen in a Nov. 11, 2009 photo, in his downtown Houston office. Mitchell, Texas oil man, real estate developer, and one of Houston's wealthiest businessmen, died Friday, July 26, 2013 at his home in Galveston, a spokeswoman said. He was 94. (AP Photo/Houston Chronicle, Nick de la Torre) Photo: Nick De La Torre, MBI / Associated Press / Internal

The Woodlands Township will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2024, but another recent anniversary — what would have been the 100th birthday of pioneering developer George Mitchell — has caused many in the community to reflect on the impact of the iconic oil tycoon who birthed the idea of The Woodlands as a premier master-planned community.

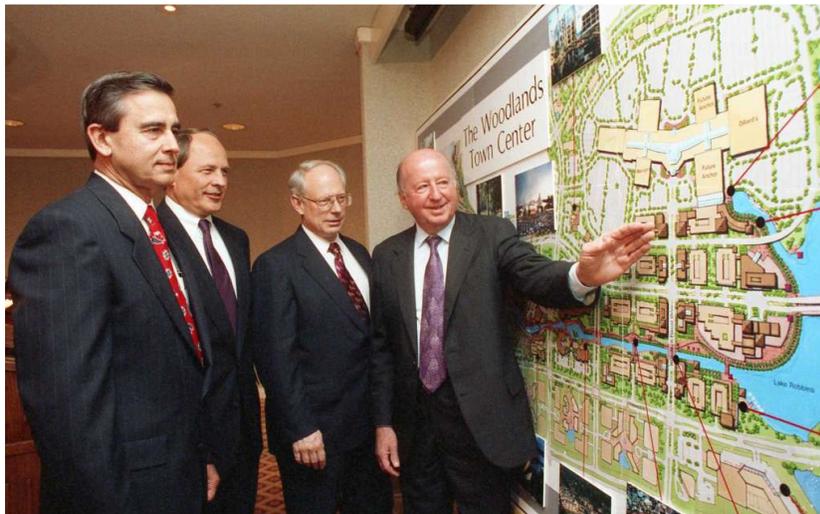
Mitchell, who died in 2013, would have turned 100 on Tuesday, May 21. The visionary architect and Galveston native was recognized by The Woodlands Township board May 23, with a proclamation honoring his contributions to urban planning and for creating the township as it is known today. Additionally, a portion of Interstate 45 —from Texas 242 to the Harris County line — was renamed in honor of Mitchell after a proposal from state Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands.

Had Mitchell lived to hit the century mark, said long-time friend and colleague Robert Heineman, Mitchell would have been proud to see the continued development and growth of the community he envisioned in the late 1960s as a radical new approach to modern living and urban planning.

Heineman, now vice president of planning for The Woodlands Development Co., a subsidiary of the Howard Hughes Corp., was instrumental in the design and development of The Woodlands since its inception in the early 1970s. Heineman said he believes Mitchell would be happy to

see what has become of the sleepy, wooded area filled with Loblolly Pines nearly 50 years after the project started.

“We have continued we have gone through several owners in the last 20 years, and what is kind of unique, in my opinion, we have followed through the original vision — even expanded it — sometimes with new owners, the original vision is lost,” Heineman said, referring to the various companies that invested in and owned large portions of The Woodlands. “But in the Woodlands, I think the original ideas were so strong that they have maintained and endured over all these years, and have really been enhanced.”



03/11/1993 - (L-R) Roger L. Galatas, president and chief operating officer of The Woodlands Corp., Donald R. Andrus, Foley's chairman, Richard Welcome, executive vice president of Homart Development and George Mitchell, chairman and president of Mitchell Energy and Development look at a map of the site for The Woodlands Mall.

The Woodlands was designed by Mitchell to be a place to “live, work, play and learn,” Heineman said, something that differentiated the growing community from other suburbs in Southeast Texas as well as urban life at the time. The idea for The Woodlands was to feature cozy neighborhoods amid the forests of pines with easy access to shopping, schools and business offices where residents could theoretically work instead of commuting to Houston. “I think Mr. Mitchell’s vision from day one which deserves so much recognition, was to plan The Woodlands as ‘live, work, play and learn,’ and for me the ‘live, work’ — the work part (especially) — was what really differentiated The Woodlands from other developments around Houston and the nation,” Heineman recalled. “Because of the plan and vision from the beginning to have a major job base 20 to 30 miles from Houston, it was different than normal. Most other developments were planned as purely residential without a job base. Many at the time questioned Mr. Mitchell about the viability of the idea.”

Today, the community has more than 115,000 residents living in nine different villages, and the township is home to numerous large corporations and businesses, many located in the Town Center — the area surrounding The Woodlands Mall. Thousands of residents don’t drive far to their workplaces due to the plan Mitchell envisioned, which also included nearby schools, churches and shopping and dining amenities built on a unique road network that preserved the woods and environment often chopped down to make way for traditional communities.

“A lot of the land around the Town Center was virtually vacant until the mall began 20 years after the initial opening of The Woodlands,” he said. “The initial projections for The Woodlands was a 20-year development plan, so The Woodlands was supposed to be completed in 20 years. It really took 20 years to create the (residential) base for the commercial development and the job base to be created in The Woodlands. Most developers would not have committed to that long-range vision. They would have taken conventional steps.”

Key elements

One thing that was not included in the famous “live, work, play and learn” motto was tourism, which in 2019 is a massive element of The Woodlands economy, generating significant revenue via millions of dollars in hotel occupancy taxes in addition to sales tax collected on goods and dining. However, Heineman noted, Mitchell was thinking about tourism in the early 1970s after growing up in Galveston and seeing the city struggle with blight before being reinvigorated with tourist amenities.

As ideas and plans for The Woodlands were being developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Heineman said, Mitchell thought about how he could transfer the lessons he’d learned in his hometown of Galveston and improve on the coastal city’s struggles in his new dream, The Woodlands.

“His vision was that people would choose to live in a forested environment instead of a prairie environment, number one. And then, at about that time, the new airport (George Bush International) was announced for north of Houston. He thought the combination of those two, the airport and the forested environment, would overcome the tendency at that point in time for Houston to not grow north,” Heineman said.

But, to draw people to The Woodlands, Heineman continued, “You had to create a critical mass,” so to speak — develop something to attract people to the community and at the same time promote it to a wide audience who might not be aware of the burgeoning potential the area had at the time.

“One thing he did on the idea of tourism, was by creating The Woodlands Conference Center and hosting the Houston Open golf tournament. Then we had tennis tournaments early on, which Hollywood celebrities attended. It acted as a promotion, really an advertisement, for The Woodlands to bring people from not only the Houston area, but also outside the Houston area because the tournament was televised nationwide... to become familiar with The Woodlands,” he said. “That was his early form of promoting tourism in a way, was funding on his own the golf tournament and conference center, which took several years.”

Later ideas Mitchell had eventually became the Town Center, The Woodlands Mall, the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion and most importantly, The Woodlands Waterway, which snakes through the center of the township from near Interstate-45 and offers unique and different

activities, including The Waterway Cruisers boats that became the unofficial icon of the township for many years.

“Really, that distinguished The Woodlands from other developments in Texas, (it was) similar to the San Antonio River Walk,” he added. “It is amazing the activity along the Waterway...people jogging, riding bikes. What better place could you do that?”

Charity efforts



George Mitchell, left, continued his tradition of having his head painted for the final evening of Mardi Gras. Admiring his cat design are Carolyn farm, Eckhard Pfeiffer and his daughter, Martina. Galveston, Texas

One thing anyone on the Houston region can attest to is the charitable nature of people in The Woodlands, something that was critically important to Mitchell, Heineman said, and led him to create Interfaith of The Woodlands. The organization, which has grown exponentially in the decades since its founding, has become a leader in the realm of public service and charitable fund-raising.

Heineman said what Interfaith has become today, and more importantly the belief of local residents in the high value of giving back to the greater community, is exactly what Mitchell hoped would occur.

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We had a diagram of The Woodlands, the three major parts it was basically the environment was one, the other was (the community) needed to be economically viable, and the other was the social element, he called it ‘man-man,’ the social institutions that make a community,” he said. “That included Interfaith (of The Woodlands), bringing a hospital to The Woodlands...bringing all the elements together. If you’re going build a community where you ‘live, work, play, learn,’ you need to look at all the elements of a community, including the institutional organizations that are a part of it. The task, the challenge, was to look at all the elements that comprised a community, evaluate each one, (examine) how it was being done in the United States in different cities and developments and how could you improve it?”

It was the combination of all those community elements — home, work, play, education, charity, health care, entertainment and shopping — that led to the entirety of The Woodlands that Mitchell had envisioned, Heineman said. But that quest was never ending, as Mitchell was always assessing what other communities had done in relation to those issues and seeing how he could optimize them in the township to create a “whole greater than the sum of the parts.” “For many of us that were involved from day one, that was really the challenge and it was what kept the interest of so many people that were involved in The Woodlands involved for so many years afterward,” he said. “It was something that was very unusual to have basically a blank slate and have some major goals such as maintaining a natural environment after development.”

While the township has become its own special purpose district with a one-of-a-kind governmental model created by the Texas Legislature, Heineman said he strongly believes Mitchell would smile and be happy with what the community he created has become today. “I think as long as The Woodlands continues to have a forward vision, is open to new ideas — whether generated internally or you see them where ever you go, on your travels — if they make sense in The Woodlands, why not consider them? I think that open mind, if it continues, will improve The Woodlands over the years rather than stagnating. I believe it will constantly improve.”

George P. Mitchell Memorial Highway

The honors for Mitchell include the designation of the part of Interstate 45 from Texas 242 to the Harris County line in honor of Mitchell, the oil and real estate titan who developed much of southern Montgomery County. Mitchell, who died in 2013 at age 94, is considered the father of hydraulic fracturing, and was the chief architect of the master planned community that became The Woodlands.