

ROGER GALATAS: 1935 - 2019

Key figure in Woodlands history ‘was a visionary’

By Jeff Forward and Nancy Sarnoff
STAFF WRITERS

Roger Galatas, one of the key figures in the development of The Woodlands and a staunch supporter of the community’s mission, died Thursday at 83.

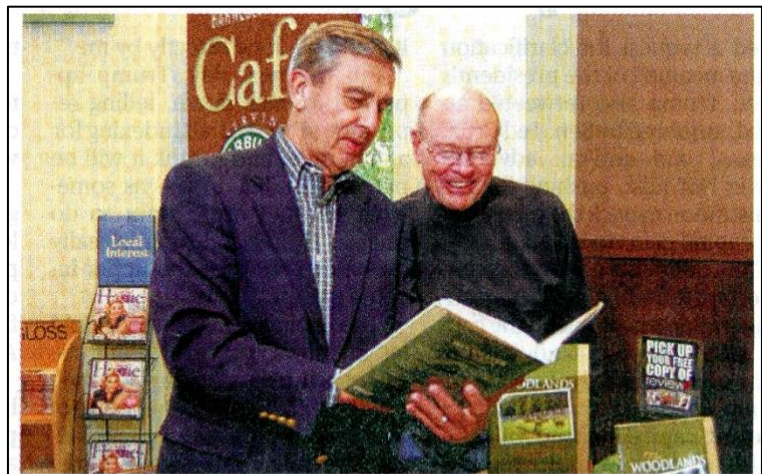
Galatas was hired by legendary businessman George Mitchell, founder of the 28,000-acre master-planned community north of Houston, in 1979 and served as president and chief executive of The Woodlands Operating Co. for two decades.

Tim Welbes, co-president of what is now called The Woodlands Development Co., said Galatas’ vision and insistence that the development of the community be a priority for future owners was a large part of why The Woodlands was able to maintain the look, feel and atmosphere Mitchell had envisioned in the early 1970s. The company was first sold in the 1990s and is now owned by Dallas-based Howard Hughes Corp.

Galatas’ work to grow the community included helping found the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, a performing arts and concert venue; The Woodlands Hospital, now a Memorial Hermann-affiliated facility; and the John Cooper School.

An avid supporter and promoter of high-quality education, Galatas also supported religious institutions and charities, including Interfaith of The Woodlands and the United Way, Welbes said.

“He was a uniter, and he knew how to make it all work together,” he said.

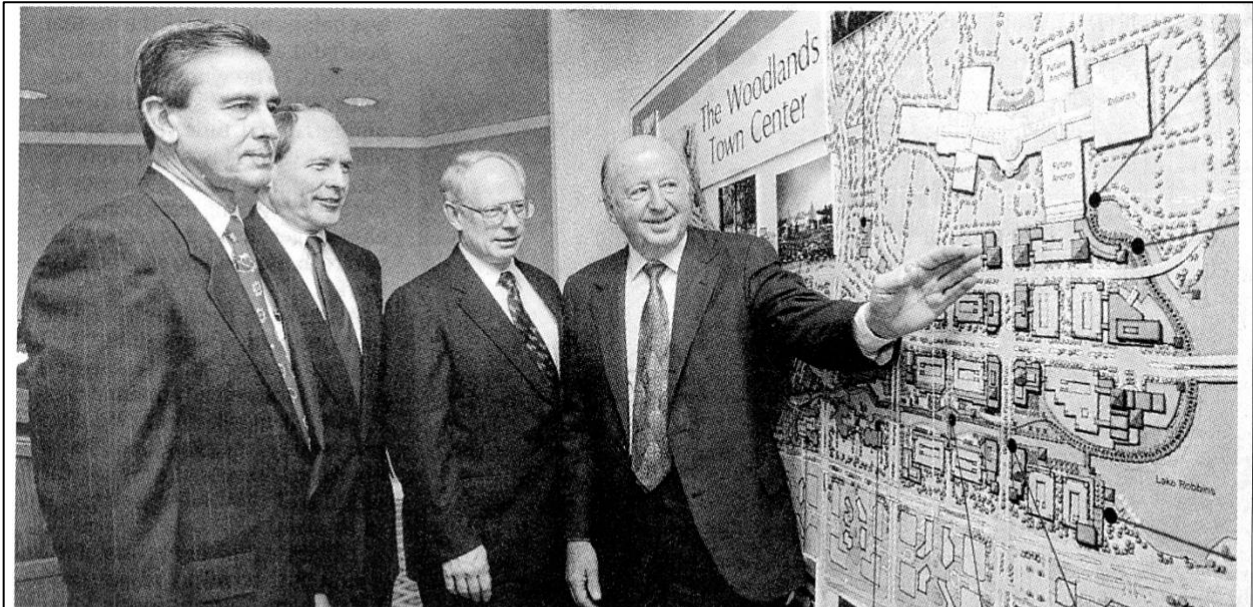


Houston Chronicle file photo

Roger Galatas and Al Kintigh look for a passage in Galatas’ book, “The Woodlands: The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown.” Galatas died Thursday at age 83.

Urban planning interest

Galatas was also integral in the establishment of the Houston District Council of the Urban Land Institute, a global research and education institute based in Washington, D.C., and lobbied for a local chapter by visiting ULI's headquarters explaining that members wanted to participate in their hometowns, said Ann Taylor, former executive director of ULI Houston. The District Council now has some 1,000 members.



Staff file photo

In this 1993 photo, Roger Galatas, left, then president and CEO of The Woodlands Corp., meets with Donald R. Andrus, Foley's chairman, Richard Welcome, of Homart Development, and George Mitchell.

“ULI probably would not exist in Houston without him,” Taylor said.

Bruce Tough, president of The Woodlands Community Association from 2000 and 2005 and a past member of The Woodlands Township board, said Galatas was committed to maintaining the late Mitchell's vision to build an enclave north of Houston for residents who wanted to escape the growing urban environment.

As part of his efforts, Galatas in 2016 helped launch a nonprofit called George's Coffee Club to promote community awareness about The Woodlands and its founder.

The group, which meets monthly to discuss the community, local politics and other issues, was founded with former Woodlands executive Jeff Harris and homebuilder Tom Cox.

“He was a visionary,” Cox said. “If The Woodlands needed it, Roger was going to go out and get it.”

Galatas attended George's Coffee Club gathering last week.

“Roger was so dedicated to preserving The Woodlands and George Mitchell’s vision, he presided over the Aug. 19 meeting,” said Tough. “(The Woodlands) was his passion. He is really going to be missed.

Galatas was also a past president of the Conroe Independent School District. Galatas Elementary School in The Woodlands, part of Conroe ISD, was named in his honor.

Committed to education

Mike Maher, head of school of the John Cooper School, a K-12 private school, said the entire staff and student body were saddened to learn of Galatas’ death and will remember the role he played in creating the school decades ago.

“Mr. Galatas played a significant leadership role in the founding and early development of The John Cooper School, for which we will be forever grateful,” Maher said in a statement issued by school officials. “Our condolences are extended the Galatas family and Roger’s colleagues from The Woodlands Development Company.”

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

When he joined The Woodlands, Galatas worked as the successor to former president Ed Lee, Welbes said, and he stayed with the company until it was sold in the late 1990s. He remained a consultant for the new owners for several years before starting his own consulting business, Roger Galatas Interests.

“He was the driving force in showing the new owners what Mr. Mitchell’s vision was and how to move the community forward,” Welbes said of the two years Galatas consulted for the new owners of the company. “He showed them how to do this community the right way and that it would take patience and adherence to the standards that had made The Woodlands unique.”

Welbes also credited Galatas for not merely focusing on “real estate development” as others might in different companies or regions of the nation, but instead valuing “community development” so all residents felt like neighbors.

Lindsay Peyton contributed to this report.

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