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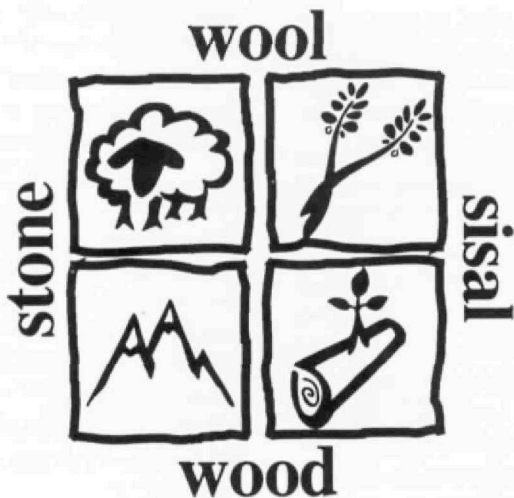


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THE NATURE OF CONTROL THE GREENING OF THE FLOOD CONTROL DISTRICT

Barry Moore

In the past, the Harris County Flood Control District has often seemed more concerned with draining land for developers and lining every local stream with concrete than with Houston's larger environmental picture. But lately there has been a sea change at the agency: no longer does the flood control district turn a deaf ear to environmental issues. And, with \$500 million in approved projects with the Army Corps of Engineers, and another \$1.5 billion in the wings in the form of proposed projects, the flood control district could be the biggest environmental player in town.

The Harris County Flood Control District was created in 1937 after the devastating floods of 1929 and 1935. In partnership with the federal government and the Corps of Engineers, over the years the HCFCFD has completed major flood control projects at Addicks and Barker dams, Buffalo Bayou (wider and deeper than it used to be), White Oak Bayou, Brays Bayou, Sims Bayou, and Clear Creek. Most of these waterways were channelized in concrete, for years the agency's favored response to runoff problems. For its first half century the district was run as a typical good ol' boys' club, a style epitomized by the regime of Tom Langford, director from 1968 to 1976. "Public hearing" was simply not in Langford's vocabulary, and concrete seemed to be the only tool in his toolbox.

But since Art Storey took over as director in September 1989, the agency has begun to establish an excellent environmental record. Responding to organized citizen effort, it made the Corps stop construction on Sims Bayou (running across southern Harris County from Missouri City to the Port of Houston) and change the design to include more green and less concrete. It squelched the Corps's proposed aggressive channelization of 11 miles of Cypress Creek (which runs eastward from Cypress Station near U.S. 290 to its confluence with Spring Creek north of Humble) and pushed for a more sensitive treatment, which increased stream capacity by about 20 percent upon the project's completion in 1990-91.

Storey is excited about his Wetlands Mitigation Bank concept, which was approved on 15 August 1995 in a memorandum of agreement with the Corps. Under Section 404 of the Bush adminis-



Art Storey, director of the Harris County Flood Control District.

tration's Clean Water Act, land users are required to "mitigate" wetland acreage that is developed; in other words, if ten acres of wetlands are to be developed, ten acres of new wetlands must be created to replace them. Rather than have countless small and possibly inefficient wetland sites scattered around on different developments, Storey proposes a much larger mitigation wetland in the general area under consideration, built and funded by individual developers and based on a system of credits, appraisals, and fees. Both the private sector and municipalities



Flood control district workers mark trees that stand in the right-of-way on the Sims Bayou project, in order to relocate them.

like this concept, which could have huge environmental (and flood control) benefits. A site for the first of these mitigation banks has been identified in far northeast Harris County. Art Storey is eager to demonstrate the efficacy of the concept to other governing entities in the county.

"We are responsive to public concerns to do flood control with sensitivity," Storey says. "We take our expanded role with respect to the human and natural environment with enthusiasm; we will take the lead if we have the opportunity."

Under Storey, the district has changed in fundamental ways. There is a recognition that the district has many tools to use for flood control, not just one, and that it needs to discharge its mission with respect to the bigger environmental picture. There is a new commitment to bringing issues out in the open through public meetings, dialogues with city officials, and an energized task force. The flood control district has started encouraging park-type uses along HCFCD rights-of-way; already 50 miles of hike-and-bike trails have been put in place along county streams through this joint public/private program. Its new Environmental Services Department, the first in any local public agency, is charged with studying nonpoint pollution sources, with finding and developing the best grass for erosion control, and with moving and replanting trees otherwise doomed by flood control construction.

All these improvements cannot be credited solely to Storey. In large part they are the result of years of dogged citizen involvement, most notably that of environmental activist Terry Hershey and her group, the Bayou Preservation Association. "Now, when elected officials don't act, citizens get very involved," Hershey observes. Also, many people have moved to Houston from places with more progressive environmental attitudes, and they have begun to bring their expectations to bear on their adopted city.

Even with its new, improved attitude, the flood control district has its work cut out for it. Some of the sins of our past shortsightedness are soon to catch up with us; development cannot go on indefinitely on the flat and imperfectly drained Gulf Coast floodplain. For example, Brays Bayou is a flowing time bomb; designed in 1954 to handle "maximum development," it has been over capacity for ten years. Only 50 miles from the Gulf, only 50 feet above sea level, Harris County has an average slope for drainage purposes of only one inch *per mile*. Getting rid of heavy rainfall, never a simple matter here, gets more difficult and takes longer as new development adds impervious roads, parking lots, and roofs. This in

turn causes the 100-year floodplain (the land that would be flooded in the type of deluge that is expected every 100 years) to spread to include land that we never expected to flood. If Houston is to have any good environmental features — urban wildlife habitat, streamside recreation corridors, recharged water tables, clean surface water for recreation, cleaner air, or buildings relatively secure from flooding — development in the floodplain must stop.

But which of the 34 governing bodies in Harris County will regulate development in the floodplains of our 22 watersheds? The scale of such a task is intimidating. The Brays and Sims watershed alone, 246 square miles, is larger than the entire city of Chicago, and the 6,500 miles of bayous, streams, creeks, and ditches in Harris County, placed end to end, would stretch from Beaumont to El Paso eight times. If government agencies can work together to handle this monumental problem, their efforts could serve as a model for future regional planning.

In the coming years, community planning may well take place within the larger framework of the natural environment, rather than the more limited and as yet consensus-lacking frameworks of urban land use, traditional city planning, or design. Art Storey feels that sensitivity to the environment is an idea whose time has come: "Even Tom Langford would be doing more sensitive projects now." ■



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