

George Mitchell's Vision for The Woodlands

By Robert Heineman

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October 2014

The Woodlands Vision

1. Maintain the Natural Environment

One of the original goals of The Woodlands' plan was to maintain the natural forested environment. This has been accomplished through several means:

- Maintain forest preserves along major roadways
- Maintain the greenbelts along the natural streams
- Establish building setback lines around the perimeter of properties
- Establish landscape standards within properties
- Develop maximum coverage percentages for different land uses and locations
- Establish the legal means to develop and enforce these goals through the Covenants, Development Standards, Development Criteria established for each parcel prior to sale, restrictions related to land use, density, and other factors contained in recorded deeds, and by monitoring and enforcing the Standards through the various design review committees.

While the Standards have been refined (and improved) over the years, all of the above remain intact from the original vision.

2. The Development Program

The Woodlands was always envisioned as a "complete" community with a major employment center where one can "live, work, play and learn." The economics of land development dictates, with rare exceptions, "rooftops first" followed by commercial development and employment. Therefore, the residential villages developed first in a counter-clockwise fashion around the future Town Center, in order to provide the supporting population and facilities needed to develop a true downtown.

The Town Center has always been viewed to be different from the residential villages. The residential villages are designed to have a small town feel in a forested setting. The residential neighborhoods, park and pathway system, schools, institutional uses, and village centers are designed to accommodate most of a family's daily needs within a 1 to 2 mile radius. The variety of retail and professional office contained in each village center allows and even encourages residents to visit several destinations during a single trip (for example, supermarket, drugstore, gas, cleaners, hardware store). This makes destinations convenient and efficient to access.

The Town Center has always been planned as a regional center. Today, over 75% of the sales tax receipts come from visitors to The Woodlands. The Town Center is envisioned as a vibrant, urban, mixed-use, pedestrian and transit-friendly downtown, containing not only office and retail uses, but also urban residential, cultural, and recreation uses with a 24-hour activity base.

While the major thoroughfares such as Woodlands Parkway, Lake Woodlands Drive, and Research Forest Drive maintain the signature forest preserves within The Woodlands, once one enters the inner fabric Town Center, a more urban environment is experienced. The buildings are located closer to streets. Sidewalks, street trees, and other pedestrian amenities are provided within the street rights-of-way. Shared parking opportunities are utilized where possible

(i.e. the Pavilion using the vacant office parking lots on Timberloch at night during a concert or the office building and Cinemark sharing a parking garage because they use the same parking spaces at different times during the day.) Structured parking and street parking are prevalent. In many places such as Market Street, the buildings frame a public exterior pedestrian space. This will also develop around Waterway Square as the new hotel, offices, and restaurants are constructed. Parking garages are “wrapped” with active uses such as retail or other commercial uses along the street in order to enhance the pedestrian experience.

The “Community Facts” sheet published every year for the last 30+ years and available at the information center (now the Homefinder Center) included statistics for “current” development as well as projections for the “ultimate development” of The Woodlands. These projections have included many categories such as number of dwelling units, population, total non-residential square feet, and number of employees.

In all of these categories, the current 2014 projections are actually LESS than the projections prior to 1997 when Mr. Mitchell sold The Woodlands. For example, the current ultimate population projection for The Woodlands is 130,800 versus 150,000 in January, 1997. The number of employees at “build-out” is currently projected at 74,045 versus 82,000 in 1997. The square footage of non-residential buildings is currently estimated at 39.5 MSF versus 41 MSF in 1997. During this same time period, The Woodlands has expanded by over 1,800 acres.

In conclusion, the current development plan is very consistent with the vision of The Woodlands during Mr. Mitchell’s direction.

3. Mobility

In contrast to most other developments, the mobility system is planned for the ultimate development of The Woodlands. The land required for the widening of roads or the construction of overpasses has already been dedicated to Montgomery County, thus saving time and the expense to acquire additional land at the expense of the taxpayer.

This contrasts to the typical road improvement project, such as FM 1488, which required significant right-of-way acquisition at a considerable expense and caused months of delay to the project.

The current South County Mobility Plan which is underway and involves all of the local entities should provide a good framework for the mobility projects, priorities, and funding requirements for the next 25 years.

The primary issue will be the timing and funding of improvements. During the last ten years, the County has not been successful in funding needed roadway improvements. The County and other local political entities should actively seek funding through multiple sources, such as road bond issues, federal funding reserved for projects in the Houston region, and forming private/public partnerships to address mobility issues.

If this occurs, The Woodlands and the surrounding area will enjoy a much improved level of service and less traffic congestion than it currently experiences, even with the additional planned development.

About Robert Heineman

Robert Heineman has been involved in the planning of The Woodlands from its inception for over 42 years with The Woodlands Development Company, founded by visionary George P. Mitchell. He has served as Vice President of Planning for the last 30 years. He received Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Architecture degrees, magna cum laude, from Rice University in 1969 and a Master's of Architecture degree in Urban Design from Harvard University in 1972.



The Woodlands Township Vision

The Woodlands, our dynamic hometown within a natural forest, is known for its balance between man and nature. We are a thriving business community and a premier destination for visitors – a place where generations live, worship, work, learn and play.

The Woodlands...

- ...is a place where we feel safe and secure
- ...achieves prosperity by promoting economic development and quality of life
- ...cultivates the relationship between urban needs and George Mitchell's vision of environmental sustainability
- ...provides premier services and activities, superior educational opportunities, a diversity of jobs, vibrant public spaces, integrated mobility options, public activities, cultural events and entertainment for all
- ...is a place that welcomes everyone from everywhere to grow and thrive

The Woodlands Township Mission

We fulfill The Woodlands vision by:

- Protecting the well-being and safety of our residents, visitors and businesses.
- Achieving the highest standards in service delivery.
- Partnering with others to sustain the vitality of our region.
- Communicating with our constituents and partners.
- Attracting and retaining a talented and innovative staff.
- Serving as the community's political voice.
- Powering economic growth through community investment.
- Promoting continued vitality of neighborhoods and commercial areas.
- Maintaining transparent governance.
- Serving as financial stewards of the community's resources.
- Evolving a governance structure to meet our goals.
- Promoting sound environmental policy.
- Collaborating with community partners to promote public events and cultural activities.
- Collaborating with community partners to improve mobility throughout The Woodlands.

Adopted July 22, 2014