

Preserving a Legacy By Enhancing West Fort Bend County

The West Fort Bend Management District and Fort Bend County Form a Link

By Sharon K. Wallingford

Effective transportation facilities are integral to community growth and a key component to a community's economic success. West Fort Bend County is truly fortunate to be experiencing an outflow of explosive residential and commercial development and there appears to be more on the way.

The enhancement of highway corridors should serve to connect and simplify our lives, but effecting change without a cohesive plan can actually divide the communities and impede mobility. Once the more heavily populated cities of the county and hubs of the region, the Richmond and Rosenberg areas were defenseless to the growth that came rapidly with the development of the Southwest Freeway in the 1970's. New growth switched direction and approached the county from the east leaving the historic downtown business centers that once hustled and bustled to keep the local economy strong fading in comparison to a new populous settling in Stafford, Missouri City, and Sugar Land.

The communities which had survived the early development of Texas, the plantation days, the Civil War, the rail boom, two World Wars, The Depression, and the cotton, oil and gas, and ranching eras and brought the county the first hospitals, department stores, and entertainment centers was feeling the effects.

Economic planning continued through the efforts of the active membership of chamber of commerce's, the formation of the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Corporation in 1985, and individual cities forming their own economic development departments. By 2000, there were signs that West Fort Bend County could become the economic hub of the Gulf Coast region once again. Planning between the cities was fragmented and the people were asking to keep an attractive thoroughfare that would provide for economic growth and expansion, yet pre-



Joey Dupuis



Cliff Terrell



Glenn Howard



Lane Ward



Vincent Morales

serve, protect and accentuate the rich history and natural beauty that brought Austin's Old 300: the first settlers to Texas and Fort Bend County. Both cities were also attempting to bring new growth and looking to revitalize their downtown's. Both downtown historic districts created economic venues to do so through volunteer hours and contributions. In 2003, the George Foundation officials became concerned about the quality of development that would follow the US59 (169) corridor to the Wharton County line.

"The opportunity to turn that vacant land into quality development simultaneously occurred on the other side of the Brazos when a small, independent group of downtown Richmond business owners met to discuss a management district concept for their locations," said Lane Ward, who served as chairman of The George Foundation at the time. As the two groups talked they extended their discussions to include Richmond and Rosenberg officials. The group realized the formation of a management district similar to the more than 41 that are located throughout the Greater Houston area; including First Colony Mall, Galleria and The Woodlands, could serve as an umbrella group and a tool for property owners to address specific local needs while protecting, preserving and promoting urban activity centers.

In 2005, the Texas Legislature created the West Fort Bend Management District, the largest of its size in Texas. The two cities appointed a five member board that currently includes Fort Bend county residents Lane Ward, the first chairman and president;

Joey Dupuis, Cliff Terrell, Glenn Howard, and Vincent Morales, the current president and chairman. A WFBMD focus group of community residents - all property and business owners - was formed in 2006 to provide feedback to the board.

Their key findings included the development of a strong, unifying design identity and a master plan, all improvements needed to be based around beautification and developing improving services, visual blight needed to be addressed and minimized, and the district utilize synergies within the cities, counties and key partners to develop momentum for economic development. On July 18, 2008 a master plan was adopted but sat idle due to lack of funding.

In October 2009 the mayors of the cities received announcement of the 2009 Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program (STEP) and a call for candidate projects. This federally funded program sparked applications from 202 statewide applicants and 31 from the Houston district. The WFBMD linked with the county to make application to the Houston District for the reforestation of US 59 & FM 762, a 44-acre major intersection which serves as the entrance way to west Fort Bend County. Up to 80 percent of the eligible project costs are reimbursed with federal funding. At least 20 percent of the costs must be provided by the nominating entity, as a local funding match. The \$1.6 million project is under study and an the winning entries will be announced in July.

"The original focus was on US 59

from the Brazos River through the city of Rosenberg,” explains Ward, adding the foundation paid for a consultant to study and make recommendations as to how the county could maintain some if not most of the natural beauty, trees and pastoral setting. “This report was presented to both city councils who embraced the ideas quickly. The only real question was how would you pay for this organization.”

He recalls both cities were willing to help sponsor the concept and eventually the legislation, but they wanted the concept expanded to cover all of the major thoroughfares in the cities and ETJs. “It was definitely the cities idea to expand the coverage areas beyond US 59. This, alone, probably made it one of the most challenging aspects.”

Ward, who has spent years in the banking and mortgage lending industry, knows the area well. His father’s family lived in Fort Bend County for over 100 years. Although he was born in Baytown, he and his wife, Vicki, have lived in Rosenberg and the FM 359 countryside for more than 30 years.

“In some ways, West Fort Bend County reminds me of the FM1960 area of North Houston when we lived there in the early 1970s,” says Ward, who was appointed by the city of Rosenberg four years ago. “I remember it was largely unspoiled with trees lining the roadway. Eventually it developed on both sides of the roadway from FM 249 to Interstate 45N. “It appears no one noticed, and the development that took place left nothing of the natural beauty of the area in place and left much to be desired.” Lane has appeared and spoken before both cities and the Rosenberg Development Corporation. “One consideration we keep hearing from residents is to create and maintain green spaces.”

“If you follow the predicted and projected figures, growth is going to take place,” he says, adding it is up to the citizens to determine the type of growth. “Will it be quality growth or simply growth for growth’s sake?” “If there is one thing that I have seen over the past three or more decades it is the challenge of blending the old with the new,” adds Ward, saying its something other cities have done well. The overall growth of Fort Bend County is bringing growth to this portion of the county and things will change as a result.”

Rumors of taxing property owners ran rampant through one of the cities. “It is only rumors and half truths,” explains Ward. “If you study the legislation there are a limited



number of ways the district can raise funds. It can tax, but only after an election of the public living within the district approves the taxation. The public determines whether there is any taxation within the district. We can assess (not tax) property within the district, but only upon approval of the property owners of the majority valuation of property within the district. So property owners determine any assessments—again not a tax. Or we can receive monies through grants, special funding and voluntary gifts.”

In mid 2009, Vincent Morales was asked to serve as president and chairman for the district. The native Houstonian who moved his family to Fort Bend county in 1993, resides in Rosenberg. As co-owner of GreenScape Associates, LLC, a design and build landscape firm based in West Fort Bend County, he sees the western end becoming the heart of the county and believes the district can help it become the county’s crown jewel.

“The WFBMD will assist in the guidance of the development in West Fort Bend County to achieve it being viewed as not only the county seat, but the center of commerce for the county in the future,” he adds. Appointed by the City of Rosenberg two years ago, he will continue to update the Rosenberg Development Corporation on the progress of the district annually at one of their monthly board meetings. “Our goal is to help create development consistency along the Hwy 59 corridor in the western end of the county; including the main corridors in Richmond and Rosenberg city limits and ETJ’s.

“The community should be proactive in creating a mechanism to preserve and enhance the identity of the West Fort Bend County community and its heritage,” says Joey Dupuis, another property owner in Rosenberg.

“My hometown is Nederland, Texas, where the population since 1970 has been a steady 16,000 (currently 16,090).” After high school I moved to the Houston to attend the University of Houston and during that time, my uncle was the golf pro at Pecan Grove Country Club. I visited him frequently and really liked the area so I eventually moved and purchased an auto dealership in Rosenberg where its friendly residents remind me of my hometown.”

Dupuis has since sold his business, but currently manages a Lexus dealership in Clear Lake. “My children continue to attend school in Richmond (PreK to High School). For convenience to work, I live in Missouri City and make the commute to Richmond to Clear Lake each morning and evenings.” Dupuis and his family plan to move back to Richmond/ Rosenberg at some point in the future.

When he purchased Fort Bend Toyota, Dupuis joined the Rosenberg-Richmond Chamber of Commerce. He graduated the leadership program and served as chairman of the board. “During my terms of leadership with the Chamber, the one effort that continued to peak my interest was the efforts a beautification plan for the various

continued on page 70

Preserving a Legacy continued from page 69

corridors, most notably the 90A corridor. The effort was one the Chamber had for many years prior to my involvement. In my thinking, the WFBMD is an extension of the chamber's efforts in the beautification endeavor." Dupuis was appointed by the City of Richmond. "At the time of the district's creation, I was working on the construction of a new Fort Bend Toyota facility on Hwy 59 at 99. I also managed that dealership at that time."

"We are at a critical time in the development of the corridors within our district," he adds. "There is so much history and character of the West Fort Bend community that needs to be preserved. The growth will continue at a rapid pace and now is the time to ensure we preserve our legacy."

"I feel that Richmond and Rosenberg are All American Cities, the Norman Rockwell types of cities that people are proud to call home," adds Dupuis, aware that Richmond will soon celebrate its 175 birthday and Rosenberg celebrated its 125 last year.

Former Fort Bend County Treasurer Cliff

Terrell is a native of Bellmead, a community overshadowed by its neighbor to the west - Waco. After retiring from serving two stints as the Rosenberg-Richmond Area Chamber executive director during the 1960s and again in the late 1980s, Terrell knows first hand what bringing new business to West Fort Bend County can do for a community. "Today businesses have choices about where they want to locate and often they choose where their image can be a statement."

Terrell has long had strong feelings about the importance of image. "It's a major factor in a community's ability to attract jobs and residents and I believe the Richmond/Rosenberg area is improving in this category. However, we need to be aggressive in our efforts to not only improve our appearance, but also in all categories that make a quality community; including schools (our entire community needs to be aware of the need to improve our average educational attainment levels). A broad community acceptance of efforts to improve our community is necessary."

Appointed to the board by the City of Richmond, Terrell claims Richmond is a strong supporter of the district and reports to them regularly.

"As someone who has been involved in the real estate development business for the last 30 years, you might think that I would be the last person to support more government regulation," chuckles Glenn Howard. "Generally a true statement, but not in the case of the WFBMD."

"Whether we like it or not, the Richmond, Rosenberg area is experiencing significant growth that is expected to continue for some time. The major roadways that traverse our section of the County will be the focus of much of the office, retail, industrial and other commercial development. That development can either be attractive or it can be ugly. I support the concept of the District because I prefer the former."

As a partner in a real estate development company that prides itself in creating quality environments, Howard realizes that the district is not asking for anything more than any good developer would do on its own, that includes a general concern for the aesthetics of what is being created. Good development is good for business, and it is good for the community. And if everyone abides by the same minimum standards, no one has an advantage or disadvantage.

Take signage for example. "If a new retail business locates on a busy thoroughfare, it will typically want to stand out among the other stores in the area," says Howard. "A common way to achieve this would be to erect a sign that is a little larger and brighter than its neighbors. The next retailer to come along in the area will want to be a little bigger, higher, and brighter than the last. And then the next one may want to add animation to get public attention. Pretty soon there is so much visual pollution, that none of the retailers can be recognized and they all lose out. And the fall out is a negative perception of the community."

"I would like to see West Fort Bend County residents become more informed about the Management District, volunteer and get involved," says Ward. "There are excellent opportunities for volunteering and being involved."

The WFBMD board meetings are held the third Friday of each month and are open to the public. Meeting sites and additional information can be obtained at www.wfbmd.org. ★