

Harris County Flood Control District Faces Budgetary Woes

Harris County residents will see no new capital improvement projects in the major watersheds in 1996 unless a budgetary solution is agreed upon by Commissioner's Court.

projects," said Storey.

Adding to the budgetary problem was the announcement by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on March 3, 1995, that it may no longer be

Storey views the Corps decision with equanimity because without the Corps, projects can be constructed at a scale and time that suits Houston residents; the project components can be designed to accommodate other considerations; the priority can be set locally; and the decision to perform these improvements is, for the most part, that of the local populace.

"We will have less money to spend, but I actually believe we can get more out of the resources we will have available," said Storey.

Regardless of the efficiency used with available resources, Storey still faces a capital improvement budget of \$0. He does have a toolbox full of possible solutions to this budgetary problem, some of which came from community suggestions.

One alternative is to do nothing. If things remain as they are, no capital improvement projects will be conducted in 1996. The operational funds



Photo courtesy of Harris County Flood Control District

With the October 1994 flood, many people in the Houston area realized just how unpredictable the city's weather can be. The subdivision of Forest Cove, pictured above, received some of the worst flooding in the city during that storm.

Under the current situation, the Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) has a projected 1996 budget of \$0 for capital improvements.

According to Art Storey, director of the HCFCD, averaging the requirements of the next five years, the district will have an annual income of \$73 million and a debt service of \$43 million. This leaves \$30 million for operations costs, which have averaged \$34 million each year in the recent past.

"If I can devise a way to save another 10 percent, we can break even for the next five years, and still have a budget of \$0 for capital improvement

involved in local flood control programs. This could strip the county of \$800 million in expected federal funds over the next two decades.

Regarding projects currently underway, Storey said the Sims and Clear Creek construction projects will be completed, and then flood control in Harris County will depend solely on the local community and its elected officials. "The citizens of Harris County and their elected representatives will be our new partners," he said. "I think the people are ready to have more say in what kind of projects are used to prevent flooding and how long it takes to get the job done."

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From the Chairman

R. Gary Montgomery

I want to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Board of Directors and membership of the North Houston Association, to thank Connie Elston for her years of service to the Association. Connie left the NHA on April 1st to pursue other interests after serving as Executive Director for five years. During the period, Connie helped the Association accomplish many of its goals and address a number of critical issues. Several noteworthy accomplishments are: establishment of the Trip Reduction Assistance Center (TRAC) pursuant to clean air regulations; the annual economic forecasts; and the organization and establishment of the daily bus service between Kingwood and the Greenspoint area. Thanks, Connie, for your contribution.

This change brings with it a chance for the organization to continue its growth through the selection of a new Executive Director. Jim Royer is chairing a Search Committee to recommend someone to fill this position. This is an opportunity to adjust to the ever-changing conditions of our business environment. The North Houston Association will continue to focus on regional infrastructure problems and issues, in addition to economic development.

We have the opportunity to address regional issues and complement the north side chambers of commerce and the North Harris Montgomery Community College District. The Association is accomplishing this through its three major committees: Economic Development, Environment and Transportation. All three are actively involved in a number of key issues, and would welcome your participation if you have the interest and time.

Flood Control

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will continue to cover paying the bills, cutting the grass and performing minimum repairs to existing infrastructure. If no major projects are initiated to move the flood plain, flood plain management will become the primary means to protect the public from future flooding damages.

Another possibility is a tax increase. A three cent tax increase would raise the rate to 9-1/4 cents, bringing the total flood control budget to \$100 million per year. A majority of this would go toward paying the debt owed on the 1987 bonds issued for local participation in Corps projects and various locally sponsored projects.

"It is a two-headed dragon," said Harris County Precinct Four Commissioner Jerry Eversole. "I'm not for tax increases, but people demand more — more lights, police, libraries and flood control. When a tax increase is mentioned, they say 'I'll see you at the polls'."

Another alternative is to increase the tax rate by 1/2 cent per year over the next six to eight years in order to pay existing debt and raise funds for

capital improvement projects.

Obtaining new financial partners is another option to stretch HCFCD's budget, as is creation of a storm water utility. Other alternatives available include sales tax, impact fees, and the selling of bonds (there are currently \$95 million in unsold bonds). However, the selling of bonds ultimately creates more debt, which Storey would like to avoid.

"I am most impressed that he's (Storey) not trying to create more debt, but provide more service," said Eversole. "He is doing this through his 'pay as you go program', which I applaud."

"We're at the fork in the road," said Storey. "Because of the 58-year history of this agency, the federal announcement and our financial situation, we are at the point of some important decisions...The question is, what do you want flood control to be?" ■

WE'VE MOVED!

The North Houston Association has moved its offices. NHA's address remains 16825 Northchase Drive, but the suite number is now #160.

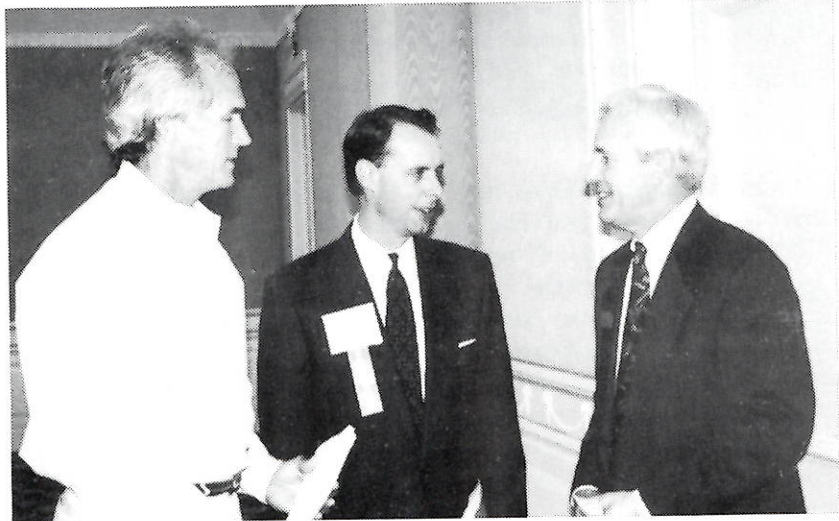
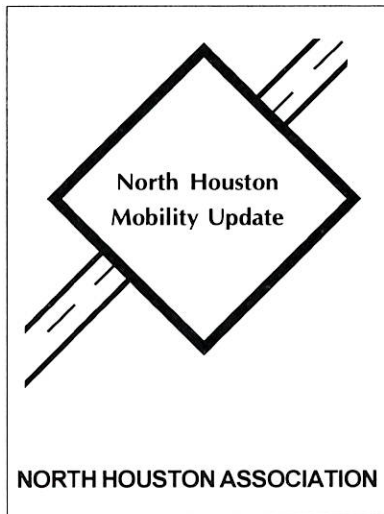


Photo courtesy of The Greater Greenspoint Reporter

County Commissioner Jerry Eversole, left, and NHA Chairman Gary Montgomery, right, exchange greetings with Denis Calabrese, chief strategist for Texans for Lawsuit Reform, center. Calabrese served as the guest speaker for the North Houston Association's General Membership Luncheon on April 21.

Transportation

The North Houston Association Transportation Committee is putting the final touches on the North Houston Mobility Update, which will be available in July. The document will update the status of transportation projects in the north Houston area that are underway and planned, as well as identify the Association's priority projects. Each NHA member contact and area chambers of commerce will receive copies of this publication. To receive additional copies, contact the NHA office.



Environment

On May 1, Governor George Bush signed SB 178 into law. SB 178, sponsored by Senator John Whitmire, places a two-year moratorium on the state's vehicle emissions inspection and maintenance program. However, this does not mean that the ETR program is suspended for two years. These two programs are independent of each other.

Speaking of ETR, emergency legislation imposing a minimum 180 day moratorium on ETR was signed by Governor Bush on April 13.

The law also clearly defines what an employer must do to avoid sanctions. Employers will be in compliance if they make a "good faith effort" as defined by Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commissioner John Hall. The full text of the new law is available at the NHA office.

Also in the 74th Legislative Session, a bill was passed regarding the Coastal Coordination Council (CCC). HB 3226 is a substantial rewrite of the CCC statute. The bill adds several new members to the Council and significantly limits the ability of the CCC to review agency actions. The ability to remand permitting decisions, one of the more objectionable features of the earlier rules, is eliminated.

Regarding beautification efforts, the NHA beautification subcommittee is working with a local landscape architecture firm to design a plan for further improvements along JFK Boulevard.

Economic Development

Following its goals for 1995, the newly-created economic development committee is working with the North Houston Coalition of Chambers of Commerce to develop a comprehensive approach to economic development in north Houston.

The primary focus of the group is the retention of businesses currently in north Houston, and the secondary focus is attracting new companies to the area. The economic development committee is working with the Greater Houston Partnership to increase the number of relocation prospects referred to north Houston.

Other Legislative Issues

In the 74th Texas Legislative Session, the NHA was instrumental in the passage of a number of bills. The North Houston Association has actively supported the passage of tort reform, tax abatement legislation, telecommunications reform and the opening of the wholesale power market to competition.

The Association also supported the regulation of sexually-oriented businesses (HB 1711), which did not pass in the legislative session. In addition to lending its support to several bills in the session, the North Houston Association co-sponsored four legislative luncheons in Austin, hosted by the Greater Houston Partnership.

Golf Tournament

The North Houston Association will host its first golf tournament on September 18, 1995, at Bentwood Country Club. Cost per player is \$150. Openings for major underwriters and hole sponsors are available. Tournament registration forms will be sent to all members in July. It's not too late to volunteer for the golf tournament committee. Contact the NHA office for more information. ■



Upcoming Events

Welcome, New Member

During the second quarter of 1995, Continental Airlines, Inc. joined the North Houston Association. Continental Airlines, Inc. is a large leasehold tenant in the north Houston area occupying more than one million square feet of space in the International Airport complex. Additional space is leased in buildings located on Sam Houston Parkway at JFK Boulevard which house numerous operations divisions of the airline.

NHA Aerial Area Land Use Maps Available

The North Houston Association Area Land Use maps are still available. The maps are available in two sizes. Prices for members are \$5 for the small map (22" x 25 1/2") and \$10 for the larger (37 1/2" x 41 1/2"). The non-member prices are \$10 and \$25, respectively. For more information, call 875-0660.

Special Thanks...

to Friendswood Development Company and Turner, Collie & Braden Inc. for their generous underwriting of this issue of "NHA VISION".

NHA Committee Meetings

Transportation

The Transportation Committee will meet at 11:30 a.m. on July 19, August 16, and September 20. Contact the NHA office (875-0660) for meeting location.

Environment

The Environment Committee will meet at 11:30 a.m. at Swift Energy Company on July 13, August 10, and September 14.

Economic Development

Call the NHA office for more information.

Golf Tournament

Call the NHA office for more information.

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NORTH HOUSTON ASSOCIATION

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