White Oak Bayou: An Evolving Urban Waterway

The White Oak Bayou watershed is located in one of the most populated areas in Harris County, beginning northwest of FM 1900 and ending near Downtown at the confluence of Buffalo Bayou.

White Oak Bayou has played an important part in Houston’s history. As a matter of fact, the city was founded by the Allen brothers at the confluence of White Oak and Buffalo Bayous, White Oak Bayou drains a watershed of 110 square miles and extends for a length of approximately 25 miles, from its headwaters at U.S. 290 near Huffmeister Road, to its mouth at Buffalo Bayou in downtown Houston.

Today, White Oak Bayou is a highly urbanized watershed that includes the cities of Houston and Jersey Village, as well as a portion of unincorporated Harris County. The watershed includes a mix of older historic neighborhoods, such as the Houston Heights and Northhill; middle aged neighborhoods, like Timber Grove, Oak Forest and Woodland Trails; and newer neighborhoods, such as Woodwind Lakes and Willowbridge. Significant landmarks in the watershed include the Sam Houston Race Park and Delmar Stadium.

This is a long history of flooding along White Oak Bayou, and numerous projects have been constructed to reduce such flooding. Actually, over time, the entire length of White Oak Bayou has been rectified and enlarged. The most prominent enlargement occurred between 1964 and 1976, when the lower 10.7 miles of the channel were modified as part of a federal flood control project undertaken by the Harris County Flood Control District (the District) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps).

However, there is still a significant risk of flooding along White Oak Bayou, particularly upstream of where the federal project ended. Many homes and businesses have experienced flooding, and studies show that thousands of structures are at risk from extreme flood events. Much work remains to be done along White Oak Bayou, and the District is actively seeking ways to leverage local dollars with matching funds from the federal government to complete a substantial amount of the remaining work.

This newsletter contains a history of White Oak Bayou, a description of the current activities in the watershed, and an overview of the ongoing federal planning study to attempt to identify a new federal project for White Oak Bayou.

You Could Flood At Any Time!

First Meeting:  St. Matthews Catholic Church 9012 Old Katy Rd. Houston, Texas 77040
Date & Time:  Wednesday, November 29, 2000 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm

Second Meeting:  Scarborough High School 4141 Costa Rica Houston, Texas 77092
Date & Time:  Thursday, November 30, 2000 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm

On November 29 & 30, two identical public meetings will be conducted by the Harris County Flood Control District to present the results of the ongoing federal planning study and to allow the public to present comments and questions. The meetings will be held at St. Matthews Catholic Church, 9915 Hollister, and at Scarborough High School, 4141 Costa Rica.

Feedback from the citizen stakeholders is very important to the success of this study. This newsletter contains a history of White Oak Bayou, a description of the current activities in the watershed, and an overview of the ongoing federal planning study to attempt to identify a new federal project for White Oak Bayou.

Public Meetings November 29 & 30

Production Information

Prepared by the Harris County Flood Control District

Fall 2000

Produced by the Harris County Flood Control District

A WHITE OAK BAYOU NEWS SOURCE

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White Oak Bayou & Harris County: Both Flood Prone

Why does it flood in Harris County? Largely because of the flat terrain, the relatively impervious clay soils that do not absorb water very well, the effects of urbanization and the fact that the region receives torrential rainfall in short periods of time. House flooding does not always occur in the same places because flood water levels depend on where the rainfall occurs and the ability of the channel to carry the storm water. Given the combination of these factors, it is remarkable that flooding along the region’s waterways, including White Oak Bayou, is not a more common occurrence.

The Allen brothers experienced their first major flood in 1843, after they had been here just seven years. The flood of record on White Oak Bayou was in December 1935, long before many houses were built along the bayou. More recently, flooding along White Oak Bayou has occurred in August 1981, May and June 1989, March 1992 and September 1998. Man has never been, and probably never will be, able to confine major floods within the channel banks. When the bayou needs to occupy its natural floodplain, it will do so. What we can do is recognize this, provide what level of flood protection we can afford, help people recognize this, provide what level of flood protection we can afford, help people

A modern historical timeline of flooding along White Oak Bayou, and what's been done to help reduce the damages nature delivers

1% Flood Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 1% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 500-year flood event.

1% Flood

1935

1992

FIRM for White Oak Watershed Recently Revised

Flood Insurance Rate Maps, or FIRMs, are published by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to determine flood insurance rates and requirements. Local building officials also use the FIRMs in the administration of regulations and ordinances required for participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (which makes federal flood insurance available to you). The first detailed floodplain studies for the White Oak Bayou watershed were published on FIRMs in 1985 and were based upon information developed by the District. In 1989, two flood events occurred in the White Oak Bayou watershed. Observed flood levels indicated that computer models from the earlier studies were under-predicting the actual flood threat. Computer models were modified and calibrated to the new observed information and were used to update the District’s regional flood damage reduction plan. This information was provided to FEMA in 1986, and after an extensive review and publication process, FEMA revised its flood insurance study and FIRMs as of April 20, 2000.

As a result of the increased understanding of the actual flood threat, the FIRMs show the regulatory 1% (100-year) floodplain in the watershed to cover more area than previous versions of the maps. The flood plain was expanded to cover about 20 square miles as opposed to earlier predictions of about 10 square miles. For more information, please see the discussion of Flood Insurance on Page 8.

United States Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps)
The federal agency authorized to partner with local governments to conduct major water resources projects. The Corps office for this region is located in Galveston, Texas.

Watershed
A geographical region of land that drains to a common channel or outlet.

Components
Specific applications of flood control "tools," such as a detention basin or levee at a particular location.

Alternatives
Combinations of one or more components that provide a complete plan to reduce flood damages. A number of alternatives may be formulated, and the preferred one is deemed the "recommended alternative."

Channel Modification
The modification of a channel across the section for the purposes of reducing flood damages by increasing its capacity or conveying floodwaters more efficiently, by widening and/or deepening the channel, reducing the friction by removing woody vegetation or adding concrete lining.

Detention Basin
An area where excess runoff is stored and then released over time as water levels subside.

Siphon Channel
The construction of a new channel in order to convey excess runoff around a high damage area.

Helpful Definitions...

1% Flood

Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 1% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 100-year flood event and is a regulatory standard used to administer floodplain management programs, the national flood insurance program and set building requirements for new construction. Statistically, the 1% flood has a 26% chance of occurring during a 30-year period of time — the length of many mortgages.

0.2% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 0.2% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 500-year flood event.

4% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 4% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 25-year flood event.

10% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 10% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 10-year flood event.

Flood Plain
The area of land inundated by floods of varying magnitudes that exceed the flow carrying capacity of the channel. The regular flow at a point, as seen from the Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) is based on a 1% flood event. It is important to note that a home in the 1% floodplain might also be within a higher probability floodplain and may be subject to a higher probability of flooding than 1% in any given year.

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Throughout this newsletter, you will occasionally see a term or phrase that may be unfamiliar to you.

In order to assist you and to help educate the general public on some of the technical words and phrases used at the Harris County Flood Control District, we have included a glossary on Page 7 that includes detailed explanations.

Again, when in doubt, see Page 7.
The Environment

The implementation of large projects can significantly alter the landscape of a region. The District’s projects not only address flooding, but also the ecology, wildlife, recreation and aesthetics of the area. As part of the plan documents, an Environmental Assessment will be completed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The federal government requires that all unavoidable impacts to the environment be appropriately mitigated. Furthermore, the District is committed to providing features to enhance the environment and aesthetics where possible. Community participation in the development of environmental, recreation and aesthetic features is vital to this project.

What’s Next...

In the coming months, project alternatives will undergo further refinements as necessary. These refinements will consider input received from the White Oak Bayou Citizens Advisory Committee and from the public meetings held in November. If necessary, additional alternatives will be formulated. Once the alternatives are finalized, they will undergo an evaluation to determine how well they meet the study objectives. Once identified, the District will present a recommended plan in another public meeting, which will most likely be held in the Summer of 2001.

White Oak Regional Plan is Extensive and Efficient

On November 6, 1984, Harris County Commissioners Court adopted the White Oak Bayou Regional Flood Control Plan, the first of its kind in Harris County. The plan consists of several large regional detention basins and a larger channel between Midtown Rd. and Jersey Village. The purpose of the regional plan is to reduce existing flood levels and to allow new developments to continue without increasing existing flood levels. Regional detention projects are generally more efficient than smaller, individual site-specific ones because of the scale of the project. Since the adoption of the regional plan in 1984, the District has spent $48 million on regional plan improvements, with the following items completed or under construction:

- Construction of 4 miles of channel enlargements
- Acquisition of 8 detention sites, totaling 380 surface acres
- Excavation of 2230 acre-feet of dirt at 10 detention sites (enough to fill about one and one half Astrodomes)

Upon adoption of the plan, work began on land acquisition, bridge modifications and utility adjustments to prepare for the larger channel and detention basin excavations. Detention storage is needed prior to constructing a larger channel so that flood levels are not increased downstream. The initial construction involved six detention basins, one east of North Houston-Rosslyn Rd. and the other east of Fairbanks-North Houston Rd. The District seeks partnerships for these projects where appropriate. For example, most of the material removed from the Fairbanks-North Houston Rd. site was by highway contractors for overpasses, saving millions of tax dollars.

Next, the four miles of channel enlargement was completed on White Oak Bayou from Midtown Rd. to North Houston-Rosslyn Rd. This work, in conjunction with the detention storage, significantly reduced flood levels in this reach without increasing flood risks downstream. The participation of the public and civic leaders in the area was critical to getting the work completed. Since then, two detention sites have been excavated, two are under construction, and two additional sites have been purchased. At each of the detention sites, environmental and aesthetic features have been incorporated into the design. These enhancements include curvilinear detention basins, provisions for wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic features are vital to this project.

WRDA: A Word That Means Relief for Homeowners

The mission of the District is to devise the flood damage reduction plan, implement the plan, and maintain the resulting infrastructure. In carrying out that mission, the District strives to build flood damage reduction projects that work, with proper regard for community and natural values.

In a traditional federal flood control project, the Corps takes the lead in the planning, engineering, design and construction of the project features. The local sponsor, in our case the District, provides the land for the project, adjusts bridges and utilities, and contributes a portion of the cost.

To expand the capabilities of the partnership between the Corps and the local sponsor, the federal Water Resources Development Act of 1996 (WRDA 96) included a provision, referred to as Section 211, that allows a local sponsor the opportunity to take the lead on a project. The implementation of federal flood control projects in such a manner will hopefully demonstrate the potential advantages and effectiveness of local implementation in partnership with the Corps.

The District views this as an enormous increase in the strength and capability of the partnership with the Corps and has already shown on Brays Bayou that this approach allows for quicker implementation of flood control facilities and expects the same for White Oak Bayou.
In 1998, the District began the feasibility study for the White Oak Bayou Federal Flood Control Project. This investigation has involved an extensive study of the White Oak Bayou watershed, including the inventory and analysis of over 12,000 structures in the 0.2% (500-year) flood plain of White Oak Bayou. Of these 12,000 structures, approximately 1,900 homes were identified in the 10% (10-year) flood plain, and approximately 8,600 homes were identified in the 1% (100-year) flood plain.

Based upon the analysis of conditions without the project, it is estimated that flood damages along White Oak Bayou will average $54 million per year over the next 50 years. While for most years there may be no damages from flooding, there may be events in other years that result in substantially greater damages. In order to address these projected flood damages, 36 potential components, or individual measures to reduce flood damages, were identified. These included the following:

- 8 Channel modification components
- 12 Detention basin components
- 3 Bypass channel components
- 3 Combinations of bridge replacements, involving 12 bridges
- 5 Levee components
- Buyout component

An explanation of these component types is included in the glossary on Page 7 of this newsletter.

Each of these components, in over 150 combinations, was analyzed and evaluated in great detail in order to formulate alternatives. Four alternatives are described in the exhibits to the right, and a comparison of the costs and benefits of each alternative is shown in the summary tables on Page 6.

### Alternative 1

- Utilizes multiple components.
- 10 miles of enlarged grass-lined channel from Tidwell Rd. to West Rd., generally within current District right-of-way (ROW)
- 2.5 mile bypass channel along abandoned railroad ROW parallel to 11th Street
- Two bridge modifications, both involving abandoned railroad bridges
- Six detention basins totaling 322 surface acres and adding 2,894 acre-feet (943 million gallons) of storage

This is the economically-optimized detention-only alternative.

### Alternative 2

- Utilizes multiple components.
- 9 miles of enlarged grass-lined channel from Tidwell Rd. to West Rd., generally within current District right-of-way (ROW)
- 1 mile concrete-lined channel through Jersey Village in existing ROW
- 2 mile bypass channel along abandoned railroad ROW parallel to 11th Street
- Two bridge modifications, both involving abandoned railroad bridges
- Four detention basins totaling 127 surface acres and adding 2,084 acre-feet (624 million gallons) of storage

Similar to Alternative 1, but with an increased level of flood protection.

### Alternative 3

- Utilizes detention components exclusively.
- Seven detention basins totaling 422 surface acres and adding 2,894 acre-feet (943 million gallons) of flood storage

Alternative 3 utilizes detention components exclusively.

### Alternative 4

- Utilizes buyout components exclusively.
- Acquisition of approximately 1,900 homes and businesses in the 10% (10-year) flood plain

Unlike Alternatives 1, 2, and 3, those homes remaining in the flood plain would not see a decrease in the frequency and magnitude of flooding.

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**Goals**

- Identify and recommend an effective, affordable and environmentally sensitive flood damage reduction project for White Oak Bayou.
- Conduct the necessary engineering, economic and environmental analyses in a timely manner to obtain Corps endorsement, Secretary of the Army approval and Congressional appropriation of funds.

**Objectives**

- Reduce residential and business flooding caused by flood flows in White Oak Bayou.
- Enhance or improve the aesthetics, environmental quality and recreational opportunities, where possible, in conjunction with the flood damage reduction project.
- Minimize adverse impacts on existing neighborhoods and wildlife habitat.
- Minimize project cost.
- Maximize economic benefits to the community and satisfy federal criteria for financial participation.

**Planning Constraints**

- The project should have the general support of the affected citizens and businesses in the watershed.
- The project must conform to the mission of the District and be implementable by the District under existing laws, ordinances and policies.
- The project must be developed following the applicable policies and guidelines of the Corps.
- The project must not create adverse flood impacts.
The Environment

The implementation of large projects can significantly alter the landscape of a region. The District’s projects not only address flooding, but also the ecology, wildlife, recreation and aesthetics of the area. As part of the plan documents, an Environmental Assessment will be completed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The federal government requires that all unavoidable impacts to the environment be appropriately mitigated. Furthermore, the District is committed to providing features to enhance the environment and aesthetics where possible. Community participation in the development of environmental, recreation and aesthetic features is vital to this project.

What’s Next...

In the coming months, project alternatives will undergo further refinements as necessary. These refinements will consider input received from the White Oak Bayou Citizens Advisory Committee and from the public meetings held in November. If necessary, alternative plans will be formulated. Once the alternatives are finalized, they will undergo an evaluation to determine how well they meet the study objectives. Once identified, the District will present a recommended plan in another public meeting, which will most likely be held in the Summer of 2001.

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- Construction of 4 miles of channel enlargements
- Acquisition of 8 detention sites, totaling 380 surface acres
- Excavation of 2230 acre-feet of dirt at 6 detention sites (enough to fill about one and one half Astrodomes)

Upon adoption of the plan, work began on land acquisition, bridge modifications and utility adjustments to prepare for the larger channel and detention basin expansions. Detection storage is needed prior to constructing a larger channel so that flood levels are not increased downstream. The initial construction involved 4 detention basins, one east of North Houston-Rosslyn Rd. and the other east of Fairbanks-North Houston Rd. The District seeks partnerships for these projects where appropriate. For example, most of the material removed from the Fairbanks-North Houston Rd. site was by highway contractors for overpasses, saving millions of tax dollars.

Next, the four miles of channel enlargement was completed on White Oak Bayou from Tidwell Rd. to North Houston-Rosslyn Rd. This work, in conjunction with the detention storage, significantly reduced flood levels in this reach without increasing flood risks downstream. The participation of the public and civic leaders in the area was critical to getting the work completed. Since then, two detention sites have been excavated, two are under construction, and two additional sites have been purchased. At each of the detention sites, environmental and aesthetic features have been incorporated into the design. These enhancements include curvilinear layouts, tree preservation, wetland preservation, wetland mitigation, aesthetic water features, tree and shrub plantings, wetland maintenance, and habitat creation. There are additional opportunities for future recreational features as well.

The District’s plan is to continue the channel enlargements upstream to Jones Road, including a bypass around Jersey Village, as funding becomes available and sufficient detention storage is completed. Flood damage reductions can be accomplished sooner if federal matching funds can be obtained. This is accomplished by identifying and justifying a federal interest in White Oak Bayou. Simply stated, justifying the federal interest is accomplished by showing that the benefits from the project will exceed its cost.

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In a traditional federal flood control project, the Corps takes the lead in the planning, engineering, design and construction of the project features. The local sponsor, in our case the District, provides the land for the project, adjusts bridges and utilities, and contributes a portion of the cost.

To expand the capabilities of the partnership between the Corps and the local sponsor, the federal Water Resources Development Act of 1996 (WRDA 96) included a provision, referred to as Section 231, that allows a local sponsor the opportunity to take the lead on a project. The implementation of federal flood control projects in such a manner will hopefully demonstrate the potential advantages and effectiveness of local implementation in partnership with the Corps.
Why does it flood in Harris County? Largely because of the flat terrain, the relatively impervious clay soils that do not absorb water very well, the effects of urbanization and the fact that the region receives torrential rainfall in short periods of time. House flooding does not always occur in the same places because flood water levels depend on where the rainfall occurs and the ability of the channel to carry the storm water. Given the combination of these factors, it is remarkable that flooding along the region’s waterways, including White Oak Bayou, is not a more common occurrence.

The Allen brothers experienced their first major flood in 1843, after they had been here just seven years. The flood of record on White Oak Bayou was in December 1935, long before many houses were built along the bayou. More recently, flooding along White Oak Bayou has occurred in August 1981, May and June 1989, March 1992 and September 1998. Man has never been, and probably never will be, able to confine major floods within the channel banks. When the bayou needs to occupy its natural flood plain, it will do so. What we can do is recognize this, provide what level of flood protection we can afford, help ensure existing problems don’t get worse, and get the rest of the citizens who are hopelessly deep in the natural flood plain out of harms way.

1% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 1% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 50-year flood event.

0.2% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 0.2% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 500-year flood event.

4% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 4% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 25-year flood event.

10% Flood
Flood elevation at a particular location that has a 10% chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This flood event is also known as the 10-year flood event.

Floodplain
The area of land inundated by floods of varying magnitudes that exceed the flow carrying capacity of the channel. The regularly flooded area is also known as the Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) based on a 1% flood event. It is important to note that a home in the 1% flood plain might also be within a higher probability flood plain and may be subject to a higher probability of flooding than 1% in any given year.

Detention Basin
An area where excess runoff is stored, and later released over time as water levels subside.

Bypass Channel
The construction of a new channel in order to convey excess runoff around a high damage area.

FIRM for White Oak Watershed Recently Revised

In 1985 and were based upon information developed by the District. In 1989, two flood events occurred in the White Oak Bayou watershed. Observed flood levels indicated that computer models from the earlier studies were under-predicting the actual flood threat. Computer models were modified and calibrated to the new observed information. The Corps of Engineers, US Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps), the regulatory agency authorized to partner with local governments to conduct major water resources projects. The Corps office for this region is located in Galveston, Texas.

Watershed
A geographical region of land that drains to a common channel or outlet.

Bed Modification
The replacement, extension or reinforcement of a bridge in order to remove an impediment to flow or to accommodate a channel enlargement.

Levee
A physical barrier constructed to protect areas from floodwaters.

Buyout
The elimination of potential flood damages to a house or business by acquiring and removing the structure.

Project Cost
Total initial cost to construct a project, plus the present value of the operation and maintenance of the project.

Annual Cost
The project cost annualized over an extended period of time.

Annual Flood Damages
The estimated flood damages, averaged on a yearly basis, over an extended period of time.

Annual Benefit
The reduction in annual flood damages.

Benefit-to-Cost (b/c) Ratio
Represents the overall efficiency of a plan. Determined by dividing the value of the annual benefit by the annual cost.
Everyone Needs Flood Insurance!

If you are flooded, it could cost you up to $50,000 in repair costs. Flood insurance can help you recover faster and avoid financial disaster.

Flood Insurance is important for everyone. Everyone lives in a flood zone. Even if you don't live near a river, bayou, or canal, you are still at risk. Floods can occur anywhere at any time.

It Doesn't Matter Where You Live...

No one is immune to flooding. Floods can happen anywhere, at any time. Even if you don't live near a river, bayou, or canal, you are still at risk. Floods can occur anywhere in your community, in your neighborhood, or even in your own backyard.

You Could Flood Any Time!

Floods can happen anytime, anywhere. They don't care about your location or your lifestyle. Floods can strike at any time, without warning.

It's important to take steps to protect yourself and your property from flood damage. You can do this by taking out flood insurance and preparing for a flood event.