

ALMOST 20 YEARS AFTER ITS GRAND OPENING IN THE MUD AND PINE TREES OF WHAT SOME HOUSTON RESIDENTS CONSIDER "ALMOST TO DALLAS," THE WOODLANDS IS DOING QUITE WELL, THANK YOU. ITS POPULATION NOW NUMBERS SLIGHTLY MORE THAN 37,000 MOSTLY HAPPY LONG-TERM CAMPERS — NEARLY THREE TIMES AS MANY AS WEST UNIVERSITY PLACE (12,920), AND HALF AGAIN AS MANY AS FLOWER MOUND (24,000), TEXAS'S ONLY OTHER TITLE VII NEW TOWN, NORTHWEST OF THE DFW AIRPORT. STATISTICALLY, THE WOODLANDS BREAKS DOWN INTO 14,946 DWELLINGS; 6,612,800 SQUARE FEET OF COMMERCIAL SPACE; 476 EMPLOYERS; 11,347 FULL-TIME JOBS; 22 CHURCHES; 11 SCHOOLS; 64 MILES OF HIKE-AND-BIKE TRAILS; AND 175 MILES OF STREETS.

Based on my own not-too-random sampling of residents over a period of several weeks — parents of high school children who were volunteering to judge a speech tournament — I found that almost everyone, like me, appreciated the neighbors, the neighborhoods, the schools, and the security. They worried about the traffic and the problems of just getting around, and to a lesser extent about safety, particularly turning children loose on the bike paths. Looming somewhere on the very distant horizon is the prospect that Houston might someday exercise its right of extraterritorial jurisdiction to annex The Woodlands in whole or in part, a fate that befell Clear Lake City. Annexion would replace the efficacious



is developing a 100-acre campus just north of The Woodlands, but the prospects for a branch campus of the University of Houston like that at Clear Lake City continue to be stalled by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

During my 13 years in The Woodlands, our family has owned homes in two distinct neighborhoods. One fit the ideal not only of The Woodlands but of upper-middle-class society as a whole. It was situated on a cul-de-sac one block long with 21 other houses. It was within walking distance of an elementary school, the high school, a major park and recreation area, and even shopping. The median home value was around \$125,000, and most houses were owner occupied. As many as 46 children of high school age and younger held down the median age, although a few homes were occupied by empty nesters and childless couples. Almost every family had one spouse at home. It was a place of block parties and a neighborhood watch, where everyone put the car away at night and kids played in the street.

37,000 WOODLANDERS CAN'T BE WRONG

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and site-specific, if essentially corporate, governance of local affairs with a distant facsimile of home rule.

Rush-hour traffic is beginning to be a problem, as was the case in Lincoln, Nebraska, when I left in 1980. There the problem intersections were defined by the *Lincoln Journal* as those where motorists had to wait more than one cycle of the light to get through. It's about the same in The Woodlands these days; one can while away three or four idle minutes getting through a couple of critical intersections, courtesy of the Montgomery County Commissioners Court, whose approach to traffic engineering is still profoundly (and budgetarily) exurban.

For long hauls, access from downtown Houston has improved remarkably since 1980. During the early eighties, the traffic jam in the evening moved north on Interstate 45 at the rate of one exit each year. Then the combination of a soured economy, the widening of I-45, and the advent of the Hardy Toll Road conspired, along with a model van-pool program and a well-patronized park-and-ride, to make commuting a non-issue once more. In 1980, my transit by automobile from The Woodlands to the University of Houston consumed an average 45 minutes; by 1985 it had reached an almost intolerable hour and 5 minutes. Now, by using the Hardy Toll Road and maintaining the prevailing — if extralegal — speed of 65 miles an hour, the trip can be man-

aged in as few as 35 minutes, with the aid of a little electronic device that sticks to your windshield and lets you zoom through the toll plaza at 30 miles per hour without even rolling down your windows, automatically charging the toll (\$1.50 each way) to your Discover card.

The growth of The Woodlands has also affected the retail environment. The Grogan's Mill Shopping Center, once cherished for its little shops, banners, Jamail's gourmet grocery store, and ice-skating rink, is no longer its old self. The skating rink succumbed to what was said to be the high cost of keeping it up, although one suspects it was no longer essential for the marketing of the new villages. The space for the grocery store was perhaps too small and inefficient to be really profitable, and once the residential buildout reached a certain point, a much larger Randall's superstore opened in Panther Creek Village. Most of the surviving businesses eventually left Grogan's Mill to be close to the new Randall's, which has already expanded its premises once so far.

Another retail-related dilemma stems from the inability of The Woodlands to capture (and to some extent control) the thriving commercial activity that has grown up just outside its boundaries. The stretch of road between The Woodlands' southern edge and I-45 is a new edition of everything that is wrong with Houston. Automobile-focused shopping abounds:

in less than a mile there are more curbs than curbs, enough neon to make street lights redundant, and, in short, just the kind of clutter to make anyone who lives along FM 1960 feel at home. By opting not to provide the inevitable Kmart, Wal-Mart, fast food, and "get your gas here" establishments within The Woodlands, we are confronted with them at slightly greater remove, but in an unbridled state.

The long-awaited Woodlands Shopping Mall, first announced in the early 1980s but put on hold when the oil bubble burst, is finally under construction. Unlike Reston, Virginia, where many of the tasteful green signs announcing "the future site of a . . ." were consumed by termites and the weather before anything was built, The Woodlands Corporation kept the sign for its shopping mall in good shape. The mall will undoubtedly be the undoing of many small shops now doing business in the village shopping centers, but it will give our mall rats and local sales tax dollars a more proximate venue than Greenspoint, Willowbrook, or Deerbrook malls.

The public schools in the The Woodlands are one of its principal assets, although in the interest of achieving economies of scale they tend to be somewhat larger than might be wished. And as is true almost everywhere else, we have a collection of neighborhood schools that few students can conveniently walk to. Despite a local preference for smaller high schools, the Conroe Independent School District recently determined that the swelling upper brackets of our scholastic population could be most manageably and economically accommodated by building a gargantuan new Woodlands high school, which would also make it possible to compete on favorable terms in football with the state's other mega high school sports programs. The North Harris Montgomery Community College

The other neighborhood was less privileged and more reflective of The Woodlands' commitment to socioeconomic diversity. Its houses were valued in the low \$70,000s. Cars were seldom put in the garage, and nobody to speak of was visible during the day (or evening, for that matter). There were lots of kids, but they were kept hidden or were busy at school. The street was given over to traffic fast enough to nail an occasional pet, and except for a trip to the playground out back, everyone had to drive everywhere he or she needed to go.

As congenial as it is in most respects, The Woodlands still has room for improvement. It needs some kind of public transportation. Elder-care facilities have initiated their own para-transit services for shopping and getting to church, but it may be time to expand these to serve a broader population — particularly children, who are often stuck at home if there is no parent available for taxi service. The Woodlands could also benefit from a community newspaper, and/or more creative use of cable TV as a means of sharing news of purely local interest. Nor is there much to write home about architecturally — with very few exceptions, the trees are expected to do it all. But even so, I know of no other remotely affordable place inside or outside Houston where I would rather live ■