

Courtesy Houston Public Library, Houston Metropolitan Research Center

The Flood

Next Time

appeared in a Corps project in Houston. For its part, the Corps couldn't believe that a citizens' group thought the channel it had proposed was too small.

Still, though the Sims Bayou Coalition had come to the conclusion that they could succeed in proving that water detention was a workable solution to flooding, the Corps said no. They calculated that the channel deepening would generate nine million cubic feet of dirt, and that in turn would require 50 years to get off site, given the restriction in the number of trucks available to do the work. But as Shanley and the coalition pointed out, the Corps had missed the obvious: for a fraction of the cost of trucking it away the dirt could stay on site, where it would be stacked up on the quarter of the site not affected by water in the streamway. There is a great deal of undeveloped land south of Loop 610 near Highway 288 ripe for acquisition to put the detention plan into action. The Sims Bayou Coalition had started out by focusing on a Sims flooding problem and ended up with an idea with a much larger impact: mitigation of flooding throughout Harris County by utilizing deeper channels and a new, dramatic geography — hillside, waterfront property — that could have an astounding impact on Houston's future.

But formulating an innovative solution to an age-old

level of protection for Sims Bayou; much more detention area would be required regionally to get to a 100-year level, or to take on any more Brays water.

The Sims Bayou Coalition realized that partnering with Brays Bayou citizens groups would increase their clout when seeking federal flood control money to put Shanley's ideas into action. Too, a joint effort could argue that experimenting with detention on Sims Bayou could provide valuable information for the larger watershed. Before long, everyone, including the HCFC, was ready to go ahead with the coalition's alternative to the old Corps plan. Even the Corps conceded that Shanley's idea could work. Then the details were worked out: plans for additional land acquisition along a significant portion of Sims Bayou and for providing a deeper stream, contoured banks, and reforestation.

Next, Shanley's firm, the SWA Group, got Brown & Root involved, along with the HCFC, with specific plans for funding the project. Two possible scenarios soon developed. In one, the State Water Development Board would pay for 50 percent of the study if the other 50 percent was paid for by local public funds. In the other, proposed by the HCFC, Harris County would provide 100 percent of the funding, with the flood control district as the conduit for

When Kevin Shanley agreed in 1990 to help the Sims Bayou Coalition fight the Army Corps of Engineers' 30-year-old scheme to line the bayou with concrete, he didn't realize that he was beginning a decade-long association that would result in an elegant plan to eliminate flooding disasters in the whole of Harris County.

The Corps wanted to pave Sims Bayou top to bottom, 300 yards wide — twice what they had accomplished on Brays Bayou. Shanley, a landscape architect and planner with the Houston office of the SWA Group, and his client group looked at the land acquisition required to accomplish that and discovered that it couldn't be done with just pieces of land parcels along the right-of-way line. Instead, the parcels of land would have to be bought completely by the Harris County Flood Control District (HCFC). Shanley and the Sims Bayou Coalition then concluded that all the surplus land beyond the right-of-way created a huge opportunity to alter the conditions that contribute to flooding in Houston.

Rather than convert Sims Bayou into a standard Corps drainage ditch designed to scoot water downstream as fast as possible, Shanley and his clients argued, why not dig a deeper channel, one that could hold excess water long enough to allow it to percolate down to the water table? Nothing in the streamway was pristine; Sims Bayou had been rechanneled in the 1940s and had only a smattering of second growth trees, so nothing attractive would be destroyed by the extra digging. At the same time, Shanley and the Coalition suggested, why not revegetate the upper slopes around the bayou to create new urban forests? The HCFC liked the idea of the forests, since it would mean less grass mowing along the bayou. And environmentalists were encouraged about growths of cypress and pecan trees — something that had never

Kevin Shanley thinks he can solve Houston's flooding problems. If, that is, he can solve the problem of getting his ideas tried.



Top: Sims Bayou following the Shanley treatment. Above: Sims Bayou in the process of receiving that treatment.

By Barry Moore

problem was one thing. Far harder was solving the problem of getting the political and financial backing needed to execute that solution.

Brays Bayou, meanwhile, as any long-time Houstonian realizes, is a disaster waiting to happen. Brays, the nearest neighboring stream to Sims, has behaved very badly in the recent past during times of flood, inundating large stretches of Braeswood and threatening havoc in the Texas Medical Center. For years, the Corps in its master planning for Harris County has visualized an early warning system for Brays that would allow them to divert flood waters from Brays into the Sims channel — a project called on paper "The Diversion Plan." A fatal flaw with the proposal is that, in the mainly African-American neighborhoods that border Sims Bayou south of the South Loop, it's seen as a system for "putting the white man's water in the black man's living room."

Shanley, meanwhile, calculates that his plan for the Sims Bayou Coalition would provide 20,000 acre feet of water storage — enough to protect the neighborhoods around Sims with a lot left over. Based on the way Houston is growing, Shanley's approach would provide a 22-year

money and contracts.

Everything now appears to be ready to go, except for one thing: Harris County Commissioner's Court has never blessed the project, no doubt influenced by then-city councilman Al Calloway's objections to it.

For the time being, then, Shanley's and the Sims Bayou Coalition's flood control project appears stalled. Meanwhile, property in the flood plain and watershed is being sold and developed, shrinking the potential land available for water detention.

But while the larger project waits to get underway, the HCFC has already completed a Sims Bayou demonstration project downstream from where Shanley and the coalition propose to begin. Those having a hard time visualizing what a deeper and wider reforested stream channel with hike and bike trails would look like need only slow down the next time they take the Broadway exit for Hobby Airport. From the bridge there the half-mile demonstration project by Brown & Root and the SWA Group for HCFC is easily visible.

It's a pleasant view, but only a small part of Kevin Shanley's broader vision. That vision takes in a future with a water detention greenbelt all around the Houston metropolitan area, one that provides a 100-year-level of flood protection and thousands of acres of new park land. All that's required to make the vision work is a lot of money, and a lot of expert politics. ■