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Bayou Degradable

Up Against the Corps Again



Sims Bayou entering Glenbrook Park north of I-45.

THE voters of Los Angeles have recently elected to deconcretize the Los Angeles River, and, in Florida, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is about to put the kinks back into the Kissimmee River south of Orlando at a cost of \$368 million (having removed them only 20 years before). But in Houston, Sims Bayou, whose 19.3 miles drain much of south Harris County as well as parts of Fort Bend County – and which constitutes a significant scenic and community resource for the varied neighborhoods through which it passes – will soon be straightened and widened on the basis of plans made by the Corps of Engineers between 1978 and 1982. The Corps's traditional approach was upheld by the Harris County Commissioners Court in December 1991 as preferable to an alternative plan proposed by the Sims Bayou Coalition (SBC). The alternative plan was prepared by the technical committee of the SBC and emphasized detention ponds. The committee is made up of five Houston engineers.

The SBC report, issued in October 1991, recommended 27,500 acre-feet of detention, requiring approximately 1,800 acres of ponds with an average depth of 15 feet; acquisition of additional flood-prone acreage in the middle and upper reaches of the bayou; complementary channel improvements including clearing debris and raising bridges and crossings; and a planting program for erosion control. The Corps of Engineers' evaluation of the alternative plan, released in November, concluded that the Corps project provided uniform flood protection from a 25-year flood at a cost of \$280 million compared to nonuniform protection for the SBC plan, which would provide varying protection from 2-year to 100-year floods at a cost between \$460 and \$850 million and impose significant delays in implementation. According to Don Allen, project manager of the Sims Bayou project for the Corps's Galveston district, the greater cost projected for the SBC plan is due to the lack of natural detention in the areas surrounding the bayou: "The cost of excavation and disposal of the soil for manmade

detention is very high compared to the authorized project."

In response, William G. Crosier, who headed the technical committee that produced the SBC's alternative plan, asserted that the difference in cost arose because the Corps pegged its projections on a period of no more than five years before implementation for its own project, but as many as 21 years for the SBC's version. He also maintained that construction for the SBC plan could reasonably begin in 1994,

not 2001 as the Corps evaluation assumed. In addition, the SBC plan would provide comparable protection to the Corps plan at a cost of only \$30 million more while protecting upper portions of the bayou first, an area that would be denied relief for six to seven years under the Corps plan.

At present, the Corps and the Harris County Flood Control District are proceeding with acquisition of right-of-way and detailed design for construction of the Corps project as authorized by the Harris County Commissioners Court, while the SBC is considering what options remain to stop the project or substantially mitigate its undesirable aspects. According to Art Storey, executive director of the Harris County Flood Control District, the district in general "is pursuing projects with much heavier reliance on detention to balance the need for flood protection and preservation of our natural environment. However, Sims Bayou is already out of balance, with 27,000 structures and 60,000 people living in the flood plain. We must be good stewards of this land, but not at an increase cost of human misery."

From the point of view of Evelyn Merz, president of the Sims Bayou Coalition, "the current project is moving forward due to an unwillingness to rethink old methods. It is now time for the coalition to spend less time on engineering analysis and to concentrate on political action." Three decades ago a similar strategy prevailed in the case of Buffalo Bayou, when opposition mounted by Terry Hershey and others resulted in then congressman George Bush asking the House Subcommittee on Appropriations not to fund a similar channelization project. Hershey recalls that an incredulous panel member asked Bush, "Congressman, do I understand you are asking us not to spend money in your district?" To which the reply came: "Yes, sir, this is a terrible thing to do to a river." Bush did ask that money be spent for a restudy. This bought sufficient time to educate and organize citizens, who protested until the project was deauthorized.

Mary Ellen Whitworth

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