



A picnic pavilion, soccer fields, and bike/hike trails highlight the master plan for Tony Marron Park.

## Tony Marron Park Gets a Public/Private Revival

Until recently, the 19-acre stretch of land in the East End known as Tony Marron Park was far from being a place for city residents to relax in and enjoy. Designated a city park in 1987, the space at 808 North York Street bordering Buffalo Bayou had never been developed. While some local residents played pickup soccer games there, the park had deteriorated over time.

"It was just a dirt field, and provided nothing but a space for vandals," says Paul Meza, president of the Second Ward Residents Organization and a neighborhood resident for all of his 67 years.

All that is about to change, with the land undergoing a massive face-lift sponsored by a unique partnership between area residents, the non-profit group the Park People, the city, and the county. The revitalized park, which was named after a longtime community activist, is set to open in the fall of 2005, complete with multiple soccer fields, a covered pavilion with picnic tables, a large playground, a trail system for pedestrians and bikers, restrooms and vending machines, an abundance of trees, and extensive landscaping and earthworks, including a drainage swale that will feature native wetland plants.

"It's certainly the biggest project we've done in our 26-year history," notes Glenda Barrett, executive director of the Park People. "But what's neat is that the city and the county are really joining in."

The idea for the project was born in 2002, when former president of the Park People Allyson Cook met Meza on a bus tour of the East End. Meza expressed interest in creating a place where local youth could stay out of trouble, area athletes could enjoy real playing fields, and neighborhood families could unwind and get some fresh air. Representatives of the Park People visited Tony Marron Park and saw it had untapped potential, with its view of the Houston skyline and close proximity to Buffalo Bayou. Following discussions with city and county officials, a decision was made to take on the project, which is now budgeted at close to \$2 million.

While the East End has gained in popularity among new homeowners in recent years, those involved in improving Tony Marron Park wanted to make sure that longtime residents of the area had a say in how it would be developed. Two community meetings were held to gain input from the park's neighbors, says Barrett, with over 100 people participating. Groundbreaking occurred in early February 2004, with Mayor Bill White speaking at the ceremony.

Funding for the project is coming from several different sources. According to Roksan Okan-Vick, executive director of the Houston Parks Board, a mayoral-appointed board that functions as a non-profit, the City of Houston is supplying approximately \$700,000, some of which is in the form of a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. Harris

County Precinct 2 is providing more than \$250,000, and the Park People is raising the remaining amount.

Among those helping to cover that cost, says the Park People's Barrett, are the Wortham, Brown, and Fondren Foundations, the Houston Endowment, the Clayton Fund, the Jack H. and William M. Light Charitable Trust, ExxonMobil, the River Oaks Garden Club, the Barbara Dillingham Fund, Robyn and John Stevenson, and W.S. Bellows Construction Company. The Parks Board is overseeing the nuts and bolts of the project. The Greater East End Management District and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership have also been involved in the development of the park. It is all this cooperation that excites those involved.

"It's a real public/private partnership," says Okan-Vick. "I wish every project could be run like this."

According to Okan-Vick, SWA Group is designing the park's picnic pavilion in a Spanish Colonial style. The earthworks will help to channel water into Buffalo Bayou, and a certified naturalist is working on the landscaping. The bike/hike trails will be part of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master plan for Buffalo Bayou from Shepherd Drive to the Ship Channel.

Another interesting feature of the park will be the availability of restrooms, something that the residents had placed at the top of their wish list. While the city rarely includes remote restrooms at parks because of vandalism, Okan-Vick says an exception was made when the residents promised to patrol the facilities regularly.

"That was a big, big plus," she says. "We know they will take ownership of them." Janitorial services will be provided by the county and the city, and Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Sylvia Garcia will provide construction of a service building to house the park's storage area, vending machines, and restrooms.

Heavy rains in January and February slowed the project down, but Barrett says that contractors are back on track for a fall completion. For residents, opening day can't come soon enough.

"It will enhance the community," says Second Ward Residents Organization President Meza. "We will have something we didn't have before. I feel very, very happy about it." — Jennifer Mathieu