

Jan. 9, 2005, 12:42AM

Amid urban growth, a plan for green space

Montgomery, Harris counties are teaming up for a park project

By **RENEE C. LEE**

Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle

In the next decade, Montgomery and Harris county officials envision a major tourism spot along a meandering creek nestled in dense woods, where people can picnic in parks, hike on nature trails or spend the day canoeing.

Montgomery County Precinct 3 and Harris County Precinct 4 are working to develop an 8,000- to 12,000-acre regional preserve along Spring Creek, the dividing line between the counties.

With commercial and housing developments quickly moving north, officials from both counties say now is the time to protect the creek and the forestland around it.

The goal is to balance growth and green space to ensure people have a place to relax and commune with nature.

"It will be a place where people can go, bring their families and enjoy nature and see how the creek was in the beginning," said Robert Collins, who heads the project for Montgomery County. "And what's so nice, it's in our back yard."

The project will include a system of parks and undeveloped green spaces connected by trails and bridges to provide access to the creek and its surrounding natural habitat.

Each county is working to buy or have land donated for the project, which will stretch from U.S. 59 in Humble to FM 2978 near Tomball.

They also have jointly applied for a \$2 million grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to help fund the project.

Spring Creek is a hidden oasis of white sandy banks lined by a thick forest of cypress, sycamore and Eastern red cedar trees, many more than 200 years old. A variety of wildlife and birds, including bobcats, deer, white cranes and red-shouldered hawks, live in the area and sometimes can be spotted from the shore or through the woods.

The creek is one of only two in Harris County still untouched by development. Clear Creek is the other.



Steve Campbell / Chronicle
Paul Salness of Kingwood takes his children Tory, 9, and Tate, 6, on a walk at Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature Center. A park will link the Jones park in Humble with the new John Pundt Park.

RESOURCES

COUNTIES BLAZING A TRAIL TO NATURE

Key steps in developing the Spring Creek Greenway project:

- **Harris County Precinct 4:** Will purchase additional 700 acres to create 10-mile linear park on south. County owns 1,500 acres.
- **Harris County:** Now building a new 300-acre John Pundt Park that will be a part of the linear park
- **Montgomery County Precinct 3:** Plans to develop 25 miles of parks and trails along the creek's north side
- **Montgomery County:** Already owns 162 acres and recently acquired about 225 acres of donated land
- **Montgomery County officials:** Negotiating deals for an additional 418 acres
- **Both counties:** Have jointly applied for a \$2 million grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to help fund greenway project

Expanding greenway

Harris County Precinct 4 Commissioner Jerry Eversole initiated the greenway project last year as an extension of a park project launched in the early 1980s by former Harris County Judge Jon Lindsay.

Eversole realized that since the county already owned several tracts of land bought for the earlier project, it needed to purchase only a few others to connect them all to create a 10-mile linear park along the creek's south side.

The county owns about 1,500 acres south of the creek and is negotiating with developers and individual landowners to buy another 700 acres between Old Town Spring and U.S. 59, said Dennis Johnston, park administrator for Precinct 4.

The 2,200-acre linear park will connect the Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature Center in Humble with the new 300-acre John Pundt Park under construction, just south of Lexington Woods in Spring.

Johnston said the county also is designing a launch for the Jones park, but a construction date has not been set.

Harris County has three other sites on the greenway: Burroughs Park, Cypresswood Golf Club and Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens.

Montgomery County joined the project early last year after Eversole approached Precinct 3 Commissioner Ed Chance.

Both sides of the creek

Chance said he was excited about the opportunity to develop the county's first green space and brought in Collins in August to work full time on it.

"It makes an excellent facility to have parks on both sides of the creek," Chance said. "It's probably the last land like that in the area to build a park facility."

The county will preserve about 6,400 acres along the creek's north side but plans to develop only 25 miles.

Collins said the developed area will include entrance parks equipped with parking, picnic and restroom facilities. Some parks will have canoe and kayak launches and sports facilities.

Several acres of green space and multiuse trails will separate each park.

The county also wants to build nature and education centers, where schoolchildren and organizations can go on tours or field trips and conduct research projects.

Other sites that could be added to the project include the 25-acre Peckinpaugh Reserve at Riley Fuzzel and crossing bridges at Interstate 45, Kuykendahl, Gosling and FM 2978.

Before joining the Spring Creek project, Montgomery County had begun preserving the creek and tapping it as a resource.

In 2002, it opened the Montgomery County Preserve, west of I-45 at Budde and Pruitt roads. The 71-acre site includes a one-mile trail that eventually will be extended to the creek, and a recycling center.

Adjacent to the site is a 24-acre sports complex and 25 acres of football fields under construction.

The land for the preserve was acquired with help from the Legacy Land Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting natural areas in the Houston region.

The trust negotiated the land through wetland mitigation, in which areas are restored or preserved to compensate for wetlands that will be developed. It's a creative, fast and cheap way for developers to fulfill their wetland-permit needs, said Jennifer Lorenz, executive director of the trust.

The 71-acre site also is a designated conservation easement, which means commercial development on the property is prohibited.

The trust also has worked with Harris County on several wetland-mitigation deals to acquire land for the project.

Most of the land targeted by both counties is floodway and floodplain property.

Because Montgomery County has no budget for the greenway project, it is trying to persuade as many landowners as it can to donate property.

The county already owns 162 acres and recently acquired about 225 donated by developer Thomas Lipar, the Houston Audubon Society and Houstonian Patricia Peckinpaugh-Hubbard, whose family once owned 1,200 acres of land along the creek.

Other deals, totaling 418 acres, are being negotiated through wetland mitigation secured by Legacy Land Trust.

Montgomery County also will rely on state and federal grants and corporate and individual donations to fund the project, Collins said.

Completion by 2013

Chance estimated it will cost \$2.5 million for park and bridge construction, which should start in about four years and be completed by 2013.

Harris County is using \$2 million from a 2001 bond issue to build Pundt park and is counting on another \$1 million from the state grant. It also has \$1 million set aside for incidentals, Johnston said.

Although funding is limited, that has not hampered enthusiasm. Officials from both counties say they're optimistic the regional preserve will pay off in thousands of tourism dollars.

"The amazing thing about it is, when you interconnect all these communities, in and out of green spaces and parks, and you bring in the water aspect, it will spur a lot of ecotourism and development in the area," Johnston said. "It has a lot of potential. That's why I think it's catching on. It's exciting."

renee.lee@chron.com