

MONDAY, JULY 19, 2010

DREAM ON THE BAYOU

A \$500 million proposal to build linear parks with 250 miles of hike-and-bike trails could turn Houston into one big playground

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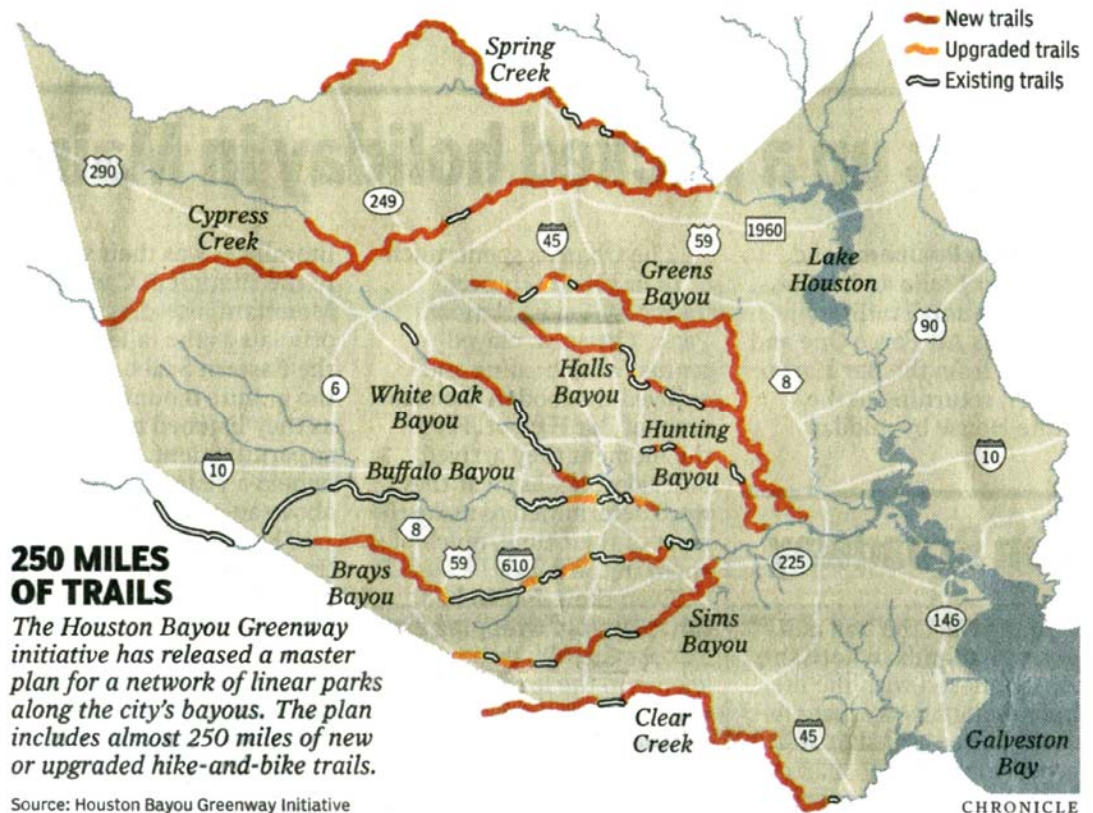
Two of Houston's heaviest-hitting business groups — the Greater Houston Partnership and the Quality of Life Coalition — are promoting an ambitious master plan to develop land along 10 of Harris County's major bayous, creating an enormous system of "linear parks."

With a potential half-billion-dollar price tag, the Houston Bayou Greenway Initiative would include almost 250 miles of new or upgraded hike-and-bike trails, not to mention canoe trails and more than 50 new parks that would do double duty as flood-retention basins or wetlands that improve the quality of the city's groundwater.

"Two hundred and fifty miles!" exults developer Ed Wulfe, who represents both the Partnership and the Quality of Life Coalition. "That's the distance from here to Dallas!"

The Bayou Greenway would be the biggest parks initiative in Houston's history, says Tom Bacon, president of the Houston Parks Board, and would add desperately needed greenspace to neighborhoods widely spread across Harris County.

How much would it all cost? Roxsan Okan-Vick, executive director of the Houston Parks Board, offers a rough estimate in "big round



numbers:" \$255 million to acquire land for the trails, build them and landscape them with native trees and plants, plus \$240 million to add the 50 parks.

The Greenway would be a patchwork of projects carried out by hundreds of parties: city, county, state and federal agencies; nonprofits; municipal utility districts; Tax-Increment Reinvestment Zones; neighborhood groups; private developers; and private philanthropists.

"Lots of people have been doing great individual projects," says Wulfe. "And we want to encourage that. But the point is to tie them all together, into a bigger picture, part of a larger plan."

Already there

"The greatest thing," says Wulfe, "is that the bayous are already there." The slow-moving waterways — Houston's most prominent natural features — cut through almost all parts of the city, providing

a rare urban right-of-way for trails uninterrupted by street crossings.

Also, the bayou land is relatively cheap. Much of the land along the flood-prone banks is already owned by government entities and so would be readily available for trails. Privately owned land along the bayous would have to be bought, but because flood-control easements prohibit building on the land, it would cost a fraction of the price a drier parcel would



BIG PLANS: "The greatest thing is that the bayous are already there," says developer Ed Wulfe of a proposal to develop land along bayous using existing trails, like this one off Buffalo Bayou at Terry Hershey Park.

fetch.

The Bayou Greenway plan dovetails with the Harris County Flood Control District's current approach to the city's bayous. In the 1950s, '60s and '70s, flood-control engineers treated the bayous like drainage ditches, to be paved and straightened with the goal of speeding floodwater to the Gulf of Mexico as quickly as possible. But there's a limit to how much water such a ditch can carry.

Newer engineering practices emphasize carrying and holding capacity over speed: Wider, twistier, slower-moving bayous, with the addition of wetlands and detention areas, turn out to be better at protecting neighborhoods from flooding. Such bayous

are also far more attractive than their paved kin. And detention areas, when not flooded, can serve as playing fields or urban forests.

'Mom and apple pie'

How long might it take to complete the plan? That, says Okan-Vick, depends on funding. If money were available immediately, the work could be completed in only a few years. More likely, she says, it will take about 15.

But the Quality of Life Coalition and the Greater Houston Partnership are campaigning hard to start fast. Wulfe has been meeting with local politicians, and in August, Bayou Greenway supporters will meet with Houston's entire congressional

delegation. So far, Wulfe says, the reception has been enthusiastic: "Linear parks are like mom and apple pie. Who could be against them?"

And already, supporters are daring to dream even bigger. Enormous as it is, the Bayou Greenway Initiative could be the trunk line of an even larger network of trails and linear parks. Kevin Shanley is president of the Bayou Preservation Association, which, along with the Houston Parks Board, designed the master plan. The initiative, he says, is an attempt to grab "the low-hanging fruit," the most easily available land along the city's largest bayous.

Bike enthusiasts note that trails could also be added

along unused railroad rights-of-way or utility easements.

And even the bayous are hardly exhausted. The Houston area is intercut by more than 2,000 miles of "open channels:" bayous, creeks and artificial drainage ditches. "If we get really excited," Shanley says, "there could be lots more trails to come."

So far, other supporters include Legacy Land Trust, Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition, Greens Bayou Corridor Coalition, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership and the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

Wulfe laughs. "It's a simple little project," he says. "Like landing at Normandy."



OPEN: A biker hits the bridge at the edge of George Bush Park and Terry Hershey Park's hike-and-bike trail Friday. Green space could be a more familiar sight if two Houston business groups get their way.