It’s really quite a lovely park, with features that check all the standard boxes: a playground, a gazebo with a big table, a soccer field, restrooms and water fountains, a paved trail that winds through the property, and lots of plain old green space. On a recent weekday afternoon, though, a visit to Tony Marron Park on Houston’s East End revealed a few glitches. The water fountains worked fine, but the restrooms were locked up tight. It took me a while to find a spot that offered a view of Buffalo Bayou, just north of the park. And on the nicest day in Houston since long-ago spring, the only visitors besides me were a dozen or so staff and volunteers with the Texas Organizing Project, clustered in the shade of the gazebo as they prepared for an afternoon of block-walking.

Less than a mile away, a rusted shipping container on the edge of an empty parking lot marked the site of Japhet Creek, a bayou tributary that was barely visible through the trees. While I poked around the site, a stray dog was my only companion until a young man showed up and started hiking along a rough path that follows the creek. Houston’s merry band of activists

This artist’s rendering shows how the Buffalo Bayou East park plan would transform the nearly depleted Japhet Creek.

This map details the 10-year master plan for Buffalo Bayou East.

Better parks should meet neighbors’ needs

By Mike Snyder

Big plans in the eastern section start with providing affordable housing

Kinder Foundation’s $100 million gift fast-tracks the Buffalo Bayou East parks plan for the East End and Fifth Ward.

BUFFALO BAYOU EAST

OUTLOOK
HOUCHRONICLE.COM • SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2022 • SECTION A

BUFFALO BAYOU EAST

OUTLOOK
HOUCHRONICLE.COM • SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2022 • SECTION A
Bayou improvement advocates envision bigger and better things for Tony Marron Park, Jaybird Creek and many other spots along the bayou east of downtown. Marron Park was the site of a Sept. 26 news conference announcing a $100 million gift from the Kinder Foundation to help fund a master plan for parks along Buffalo Bayou in the East End and Fifth Ward neighborhoods.

As the Chronicle's Diane Cowen reported, the gift from philanthropists Nancy and Rich Kinder will serve as a catalyst for additional funds from the city of Houston, Harris County, federal housing tax credits and future fundraising by the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, which in 2014 released the master plan that brings together work from many leading landscape architecture firms. One of the first planned projects, with work starting early next year, is to create a pocket park at Jaybird Creek, later connected to an expanded Tony Marron Park by a pedestrian bridge, Cowen reported.

As much about the Kinder gift, I recalled an article I wrote for the Chronicle almost exactly 20 years ago, on Sept. 22, 2001, when the Kinder partnership released a master plan titled “Buffalo Bayou and Beyond.” The 30-page document envisioned dozens of improvement projects along the bayou from Shepherd Drive to the Ship Channel Turning Basin, with an additional goal of energizing private development to adjacent neighborhoods. “All over the world, great cities are reinventing themselves around their waterfronts,” an overview of the plan stated. “Think of New York’s harbor, Chicago’s lakefront, Baltimore’s inner harbor, San Francisco’s bay, Barcelona’s waterfront, Paris’ Seine riverfront, and London’s Docklands.”

When my editor read those words — the same! — San Francisco Bay? Really? — her eyes rolled, figuratively if not literally. “I said my story should be more skeptical. I pointed out that I wasn’t reporting this as a done deal, only as a plan, but she wasn’t fully modified. Today, of course, the award-winning Buffalo Bayou Park in its western sector from Shepherd to downtown shows that the plan was more than a pipe dream. The park, which was largely designed with standing water, was tested by a series of Books during consecutive and then Hurricane Harvey; its resilience and inclusive design impressed judges from the Urban Land Institute and won the park in the 2021 global award for Excellence. From that achievement, though, mostly shifted rather than silenced the skepticism. Sure, they’ve built a lovely park on the side of town where better-off, mostly white people live, but what about those who live outside the “Houston Arrow,” which my colleague Leah Kovitz has so ably described.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics Kinderkit document — which has persisted since Houston leaders began to understand that “quality of life” features like parks and trails are vital elements of any city that aspires to greatness. The Shepherd-to-downtown segment of Buffalo Bayou Park serves with amenity most days — Spaniards chad chat off past meets pushing strollers, couples lounge in the gaze, alongside a group playing volleyball, a family spreads out a blanket for a picnic in the shade of towering oak trees, a stone’s throw from the bay. People in the predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods along the bayou’s eastern segment seem to be the same activities, the same gift. The plan from the Kinders, who have also donated generically to other major Houston parks projects, shows that some of the city’s most influential citizens recognize this inequity and are determined to correct it. The many more and admires of the existing Buffalo Bayou Park should be expected as a carbon copy east of downtown. The adjoining neighborhoods have different populations with different cultures, and the east segment improvements aim to reflect that, based on input gathered from area residents during planning. They’re a big step for Buffalo Bayou Park and shipping it over to the East End.”

Anne Owen, the president of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, told me. For example, the east segment will not have a dog park — a highly popular feature of the current park — because most of the people who attended community meetings said they didn’t want one. Perhaps the greatest skepticism now is not whether the park will draw people or whether investment will go into Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, but whether it will accelerate gentrification. Will the very people who have long been unable to “the arrow” be displaced just as their parks and other amenities improve? Importantly, the first project planned in this initiative is not a park; it’s an affordable housing development. The project will start with 80 multi-family units, developed with federal tax credits in a joint venture between the Buffalo Bayou Partnership and Chicago-based development firm Brinshore. It will stand at the bayou’s intersection with Lockwood.

That project has been given such priority above a recognition of the risk that when high-quality public spaces are developed in low-income neighborhoods, the concern is that these projects will make neighborhoods more desirable, raise property values and hence tax rates, pushing out people who can’t afford the higher levies. It seems absurd to argue that high-quality parks should be withheld from neighborhoods that need them, yet the concern is not without foundation. As Manhattan, the conversion of abandoned tracks into the High Line park initially generated a kind of euphoria that turned into bitterness as longtime residents and businesses were priced out of adjacent neighborhoods. Recognizing this, the Kinder’s high-line leadership put together a network of major infrastructure reuse projects around the country, including Buffalo Bayou Park, to show how incorporate affordability and equity in plans from the get-go. Still, there’s only so far a park plan can go. The long-term answer is a fairer state tax structure and greater income equality, but in the meantime, it’s heartening to see efforts like this housing development that try to address the issues, however incompletely. As Owen told me, “We can’t solve all the problems in the world.”

Perhaps not, but the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, the Kinder Foundation and others involved in this initiative deserve the thanks of every Houstonian, not just those in the adjacent neighborhoods. A bigger, better, fairer parks system makes for a better city, something that we all bragging rights. Even the.

Mike Snyder is a Houston writer who retired from the Chronicle in 2002 after 30 years as a reporter, editor and columnist.

FROM PAGE A13

“Buffalo Bayou and Beyond.”

A master plan titled “Buffalo Bayou and Beyond.”

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.

The Kinder Foundation gift is a welcome response to the skeptics.