

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

Down by the Riverside

By Jennifer Evans-Cowley

San Antonio has long had a well-developed, vibrant commercial riverfront. Now other Texas cities, including Laredo, El Paso, Fort Worth and Dallas, are looking to capitalize on their own riverfronts by turning them into parklands, entertainment venues and commercial corridors.

SAN ANTONIO'S RIVER WALK is a popular tourist destination year-round. Visitors find entertainment, restaurants and a variety of events, including the annual holiday river parade and lighting ceremony, within leisurely walking distance of their riverside hotels.

Laredo

Located along the Rio Grande River, Laredo already is a major hub for international freight movement between Mexico and the United States. City officials now see the riverfront's potential to serve a dual purpose: to function as an attractive gateway to the United States and to boost economic development in the historic downtown district. With these goals in mind, the city developed the El Portal riverfront project.

The project calls for the city's riverfront to be used for commercial development and public facilities. A key component of the project is a road that will open the riverfront to commercial development and tourism. The nearly 26-mile road will run along the Rio Grande from Zacate Creek to Laredo Community College and will connect to I-35.

The proposal also includes a complete redesign of the area around International Bridge No. 1. The development will include a series of plazas, a riverfront promenade, a Water Street pavilion, an outdoor market, retail development and reconstruction of city and federal offices. More pedestrians will be able to cross the bridge after the redesign.

Laredo's officials plan to develop a greenbelt with walking and biking trails, picnic areas, a bird sanctuary and a nature preserve. The northern edge of the park will connect to the Lamar Bruni Vergara Environmental Science Center's Paseo del Indio Nature Trail at Fort McIntosh.

In addition to the city-initiated improvements, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted a feasibility study to restore wetlands along the river. Currently, the Corps is designing the wetlands restoration project.

The Environmental Protection Agency granted Laredo \$200,000 as part of the Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Initiative to clean up contaminated sites along the river. The grant allowed the city to inventory properties along the river and work with current owners, real estate licensees, lending institutions and buyers to educate these groups about the city's brownfields efforts.

The total cost of the El Portal project is estimated at \$18 million. The city has been purchasing land along the river from the Laredo Community College to Zacate Creek, south of downtown, to allow for development of parkland and commercial development. The design for phase one of the El Portal project has been approved by the city council.



A BOAT LAUNCH at Sylvan Avenue was constructed under the parks portion of the \$1 billion Trinity River Corridor Project in Dallas. More than 6,000 acres along 20 miles of the river will be included in the project.

During the first phase of the project, 140 acres of riverfront property near the bend in the Rio Grande will be developed as nature trails. The border crossing administration building will be demolished and a new building constructed, along with a new parking lot, which will be connected to the bridge via escalators and elevators.

Phase one will also include the introduction of pedestrian smartcards. These allow pedestrians to purchase multiple bridge crossings. Pedestrians insert the card into a machine to open the turnstiles. Currently, 95 percent of pedestrians using the bridge are commuters who go back and forth across the border. This system is expected to help the flow of pedestrian traffic.

El Paso

In El Paso, construction has begun on a 32-mile park along the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande Riverpark will connect existing and proposed significant sites along the historic river corridor through a series of trails, cultural destinations, community parks and historical markers.

Projects to be undertaken include construction of bicycle and pedestrian trails along the river's edge, design of a riverfront municipal park, adaptive reuse of industrial and agricultural buildings along the banks, renovation of abandoned facilities into visitor areas with shops and restaurants and wetland restoration.

Commercial development will be adjacent to the Riverpark's trailheads. Historical and cultural activities are expected to encourage businesses to locate close to the trails. El Paso's designated empowerment zone abuts the river, allowing economic development projects to be linked to other Riverpark amenities, further enhancing the value of zone investments.

A \$1 million grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department was matched with \$500,000 in local money to fund the trail system in El Paso's Upper Valley. The city also received a \$3.5 million grant from the Texas Department of Transportation to fund projects in the Lower Valley from Ascarate Park to the Rio Bosque wetlands project.

The first phase of the five-phase project includes the construction of a ten-kilometer walking and bicycling trail. Construction

between the Country Club area and Canutillo began in June 2003 and is scheduled for completion in November 2003.

The second phase will run between Canutillo and the New Mexico state line near Vinton. The area from Ascarate to Rio Bosque in Socorro will be constructed in the third phase and Socorro to Tornillo in the fourth. The first four phases of the project are expected to be finished by 2007. The fifth phase includes the downtown area from Hart's Mill to Ascarate.

Fort Worth

Fort Worth has plans to encourage development along its riverfront. The Trinity River Vision, developed by the Tarrant Regional Water District, calls for the removal of a system of levees installed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s.

The result will be a lake along an 850-acre area from Seventh Street to the stockyards. The new waterfront will include commercial, entertainment, retail and high-end residential development. The project is expected to generate 9.6 million

square feet of new property for development.

Phase one will create a mile of urban waterfront between Main and Seventh streets and could be finished in five years, according to James Oliver, general manager of the Tarrant Regional Water District. A number of dif-

Laredo, El Paso, Fort Worth and Dallas hope to lure visitors to riverfront areas with parklands, office, retail and entertainment development.

ferent projects have been proposed.

Pier 1 Imports and Radio Shack plan to build new corporate campuses along the river. A 1,500-unit residential development is proposed in the Samuels Avenue neighborhood. Tarrant County College is considering purchasing the TXU power plant on the bank of the river at North Main Street for a new downtown campus.

Recreational uses are also planned. A canoe run will be opened in Trinity Park in late 2003 to test interest in water enhancements.

The Corps of Engineers is conducting a feasibility study and environmental impact review that is expected to be completed in spring 2005.

The Trinity River Vision project could total \$285 million. According to Oliver, this total would include \$250 million for construction of a 50-acre lake, including demolishing current



A FORMER POWER PLANT site may become a community college campus. The project would be one of many included in the Trinity River Vision developed by the Tarrant Regional Water District.

levees and building a bypass channel to carry floodwaters. Riverfront development would cost about \$15 million and dam improvements to raise the river's water level would add an additional \$20 million to the project's total cost.

There has been substantial public support for the development of the lake and riverfront areas. The result is expected to be an active office, retail and entertainment corridor between downtown and the stockyards.

Dallas

Dallas has had plans to redevelop the Trinity River area for more than 30 years. The Trinity River Corridor Project is a \$1 billion project that will encompass more than 6,000 acres along 20 miles of the Trinity River. The six-year plan calls for improvements to the city's floodway, along with retail, entertainment and residential areas. In 1998, Dallas voters approved a bond program that allocated \$246 million to the Trinity River Corridor Project.

Flood prevention is the primary goal of the project, with commercial revitalization running second. The Dallas floodway extension will be a system of wetlands and protective levees to reduce the risk of flooding. This part of the project will convert previously flood-prone areas into properties suitable for development. Once the floodway extension is completed, the area along the river will be made available for commercial development.

The \$92 million parks portion of the project is moving forward. A boat launch giving recreational access to the river at Sylvan Avenue was completed in January 2002. Construction on a second boat launch and two nature trails began during the summer of 2003.

Other parts of the project — a downtown lake, equestrian center and an interpretive center — are being designed. The city is working to acquire 2,700 acres along the river to expand the Great Trinity Forest. Construction on the equestrian center, which will be located in the Great Trinity Forest, is expected to begin in 2006. Construction of a northern gateway to the forest, planned for the vicinity of Moore Park, is expected to begin in late 2003.

In addition to the recreational aspects of the development, a new Woodall Rodgers Bridge has been designed. The new bridge will extend the Woodall Rodgers Freeway over the Trinity River, connecting downtown Dallas with Oak Cliff. The bridge is expected to ease traffic congestion into and out of the downtown area.

In Laredo, Fort Worth and Dallas, the Corps of Engineers has been heavily involved in evaluating the feasibility of riverfront development. The cooperation of the Corps, along with significant public investment by the cities, may well result in revitalized commercial corridors along riverfronts across the state. ♣

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