

A Step in the Right Direction Towards a Greener Harris County

"I think that I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree..." Poems are made by fools like me, But only God can make a tree." Joyce Kilmer, 1886-1918 Seeking refuge from the city, new comers and native Texans were attracted to northwestern Harris County where the region's pine forests and bottom hardwoods provided both beauty and a cooling barrier insulating urban neighborhoods from congested traffic noise and air pollution. As roads pierced the thickets, new subdivisions such as Norchester, Memorial Northwest, Kingswood, Ponderosa Forest, Westador, Greenwood Forest, Huntwick and others sprang up in "the Northwest subdivision explosion." (1)

"For the residents of North Harris County, new suburbia was a mixed blessing." (1) Inevitably the forest's trees gave way to the onslaught of bulldozers clearing the land for streets, homes and storm water detention ponds constructed to lessen the chance of the homes being flooded. Alarmed by increased flooding and shrinking forests, a coalition of home owner associations and municipal utility districts formed the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition (CCFCC) in 1999 with reversal of these 2 trends being their primary goal.

A four-year project begun shortly after formation of CCFCC culminating in a news conference on October 24th, 2005, announced it had been determined from a research study of trees in the eight-county region surrounding Houston, that between 1992 and 2000 the forest cover declined by 17 percent - a decrease of 486 square miles - resulting in a net loss of over 78 million trees. (2). It reports, "Land use change and invasive tree species pose significant threats to the future extent and composition

of the regional forest." And "Chinese tallow is now the single most common tree species in the region, at 23 percent of all trees."

Perhaps recognizing the growing sense of community urgency to reverse this extremely alarming trend, Harris County Commissioners Court recently passed a new landscaping regulation described in the following article published in the Houston Environmental News Update, 2/24/06 edition published by the Citizens Environmental Coalition.

HARRIS COUNTY ADOPTS LANDSCAPING REGULATIONS

By Ella Tyler.

Citizens' Environmental Coalition (3)

New regulations requiring landscaping for all new single-family residences and commercial developments in unincorporated areas of Harris County went into effect on Nov 15, 2005. The regulations require that parking lots be screened from public streets by a tree or shrub barrier, that trees be planted adjacent to public streets at the rate of one tree per 30 feet of frontage, and that parking lots have one tree for every ten parking spaces. In parking lots, each parking space must be within 120 feet of a tree. The regulations also prohibit removal of trees within rights of way and impose special

requirements for large trees. Houses on lots that are smaller than 5,000 square feet must have one tree; two trees are required if the lot is larger. Trees must be 1.5 caliper inches or larger. The regulations are similar to the City of Houston's regulations and adopt the city's approved tree list. For more information, call the Harris County Engineering Department at (713) 956-3000 or see its website at www.eng.hctx.net/permits. The landscaping requirements are under infrastructure (subdivision) regulations. The approved tree and shrub lists are in Appendix C and D, Chapter 33, Code of Ordinances, City of Houston.

The environmental community has indicated their approval this regulation is a start in the right direction. Improvement in preservation of existing trees is desired. One indicator of the significance of this as noted in the Houston's Regional Forest report, "Very large trees - 20 inches or greater - contribute 90 percent of the \$205 billion replacement value of the regional forest."

This Look Upstream article is one in a series published as a public service in the neighborhood news letters of communities served by the Municipal Utility District and Home Owner Associations in and near the Cypress Creek Watershed. For more information visit their web site, www.ccfcc.org or e-mail floodalliance@ccfcc.org



- (1) *The Heritage of North Harris County, North Harris County Branch, American Association of University Women, 1977.*
- (2) *Houston's Regional Forest, Structure - Functions - Values published by U.S. Forest Service - Texas Forest Service. September 2005.*
- (3) *Subscription to Houston Environmental News Update can be made at the CEC web site www.cec.houston.org or calling 713-524-4232.*