



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

The sun sets on Westbury Lake at Willow Waterhole in southwest Houston. The lake is one of six that form a detention basin to help absorb and detain rainwater.

# Willow Waterhole

How a flood control project bloomed into a beautiful, recreational green space

**By Diane Cowen**  
STAFF WRITER

Just as Bill Burhans and Howard Sacks mention the coyotes, bobcats, opossums and raccoons that roam the Willow Waterhole Greenspace in southwest Houston, a stray cat emerges from tall grasses and starts a stare-down.

The kitty is skittish enough that it runs away — a gentler creature among the menagerie of birds, fish and four-legged animals that call these 291 acres home.

Willow Waterhole is a bit of a happy coincidence that emerged from a Harris County Flood Control District project that could have been another ugly concrete jungle.

Instead, the series of man-made lakes dug out from land that held little more than aban-



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

**Shane Bennett, from left, Dameion Crook and Eric Sims display their Eagle Scout pins at the Willow Waterhole Greenspace.**

doned buildings, is a place for walkers and runners, bird-watchers, anglers and others in search of a quiet spot in nature. Work finished in 2019, too late to help relieve flooding from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

There was a time when every request that Burhans, Sacks and other Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy board members and supporters made was met with a firm “no.” They could barely get assurances that the grass would be mowed a few times a year. But that has changed. They’re in the middle of a capital campaign to raise \$15 million to pay for paved trails, picnic tables and gazebos, a fishing pier, kayak launch, dog park and additional parking, among other bells and whistles.

The group got a major boost  
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## WATERHOLE

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when Nancy and Rich Kinder's Kinder Foundation donated \$2 million to the cause last fall, promising another \$2 million when matching funds are secured. This donation seemingly was the green light that prompted other benefactors to embrace Willow Waterhole — although the community has loved it all along.

Now they're planning Levitt Pavilion, an outdoor music venue with lawn seating for 5,000, which is included in the capital campaign and could open in 2024.

Guy Hagstette, senior vice president of parks and civic projects for the Kinder Foundation, was approached by Sacks several years ago about a potential donation. Among other things, they had to wait to see if a spur of the Fort Bend Toll Road would run through a corner of the park. But eventually, he and the Kinders said "yes."

"I'm incredibly impressed with that all-volunteer group," Hagstette said. "They have 60-some Eagle Scout projects. Trees for Houston has given them trees. I also came to understand they hadn't been able to break out. People like them, and they get small donations or grants here and there, but they hadn't been able to make the big move. I was straightforward. I took Nancy (Kinder) out there and said, 'What do you think?' She looked at it and said, 'This is amazing.'"

### A group effort

Today, Willow Waterhole has six small bodies of water, Dog Lake, Scout Lake, Willow Lake, Triangle Lake, Prairie Lake and Westbury Lake, all dug out from flat ground. From drawings created by former SWA CEO Kevin Shanley, trucks moved around 1.5 million tons of dirt to create lakes that are 6 to 8 feet deep, mounding extra dirt into hills for a rolling landscape that feels natural, even if many decades ago the land was used for growing rice.

Seeded with wildflowers, the slopes and open land are blooming with shimmering bluebonnets and other petals in an annual spring rite for visitors that include the 50,000 people who live within 3 miles of the park.

There are 8 miles of trails, much of it grass and the remainder a combination of crushed granite or paved concrete. The Kinder donation will, in part, go toward paving more than half of it, with money from Precinct 1 County Commissioner Rodney Ellis paying for much of the rest.

"Willow Waterhole is a shining example of government at its best," said Ellis, who likes to ride his bicycle at the park. "It's a flood infrastructure project for a community that for too long was left behind. It's a green space, complete with hike and bike trails, that contributes significantly to public health, quality of life and property values for nearby residents. I hope it is a shining example of smart and collaborative infrastructure for other communities to follow."

Walking and jogging trails are one of the most sought-after amenities in any park right now, as the pandemic has sent Houston-area residents outdoors for exercise, sunshine and fresh air. High schools use the trails here for track meets, too.

The lakes are stocked for anglers, and a fishing pier is on the way. Westbury High School is a neighbor, and its students collected water samples for hands-on lessons in environmental science.

Trees for Houston's 500 trees are scattered throughout the property, with a large cluster on a back slope, the designated place for the nonprofit's Tribute trees, those funded as a memorial in the name of a donor's loved one.

Sacks and Burhans note that almost as soon as the green space was finished, wildlife showed up. Birds are a constant, and Houston Audubon Society bird counts have listed more than 200 species who either live here or pass through on migratory routes.

There's also a 15-acre plot of Gulf Coast Native Prairie that



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

The six lakes at Willow Waterhole were dug out from flat ground. Most are between 6 and 8 feet deep.



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

David and Karen Wolf's 7-month-old grandson, Grayson, looks up at his grandparents and his dog, Tucker, while enjoying the bluebonnets growing at Willow Waterhole.



Source: WillowWaterhole.org

Staff graphic

was found when engineers and planners first looked at the site. Right now, it looks like a patch of weeds and wildflowers, but future funding will help protect this endangered ecosystem.

The Dominican Sisters of Mary Immaculate Province St. Catherine Convent — the "Rally Nuns" known for their avid support of the Astros — appreciate all that Willow Waterhole brings.

Before its installation, the Catholic convent was in danger of flooding from heavy rains. Now, water drains right into the lakes.

"It is a good place for our sisters to take walks. We go there on our bicycles and take our elderly sisters there on golf carts," said Sister Maria Theresa Nguyen, who has lived at the convent for more than 30 years. "We go there to get in touch with God, who is our ultimate creator. He uses the talents of men and women to make it more beautiful with trees and the ponds and, now, the wildflowers."

### Two-for-one deal

Burhans, now 65 and retired from Shell, first embraced the green space when he was involved with a local Little League team. The flood control district was evaluating the Westbury area for ways to

mitigate flooding of both Brays and Sims bayous.

As they zeroed in on the land that is now Willow Waterhole, they gathered stakeholders for input, and Burhans became the Little League's representative.

Sacks, 72 and retired from broadcast advertising, joined in a little later, and the two — along with a legion of volunteers — have devoted much of their retirement time to generating ideas and funding for the green space.

The federal government gave Harris County a chunk of money for flood mitigation, and in 1999, Harris County Commissioners earmarked \$75 million

of it for what is now Willow Waterhole, a flood control project disguised as a park.

As far back as the 1990s, Shanley was encouraging land planners to connect flood control projects to parks, though such projects have only materialized more recently.

When the Army Corps of Engineers was looking for enough land to ease flooding in neighborhoods along Sims Bayou, Shanley pointed to what is now Willow Waterhole. The added value was that if it was successful, it would also ease problems with flooding of Brays Bayou, a long meandering bayou that affects thousands of homes and businesses, he said.

Eventually, enough people agreed that the site in southwest Houston, bordered by South Post Oak on the east and South Main on the south, would work. Five different lakes were created with culverts running under roads to divert rainwater away from residential areas and into this recreational spot.

"I'd been advocating (for parks) and drawing pictures of what could be for a long, long time," Shanley said. "Interestingly, a lot of big, planned communities in suburban Houston had to start storing stormwater

on their own land flood control, and private developers realized 'if I have to give up all this land, I'll make it an asset and sell the houses faster and for more money.'"

Willow Waterhole may have been one of the first projects to be talked about as a flood control/parkland design — but others finished before it, including The Hill at Sims in the Sunnyside-South Acres area, the White Oak Bayou Greenway and Arthur Storey Park near Sam Houston Parkway.

Shanley saw his plan as a two-for-one deal: Dig a hole deep enough for flood control but not so deep that fish won't live. Instead of spending money to haul dirt away, spend less and move the dirt around, creating navigable slopes and hills that look nice and help block noise from passing vehicles.

There are hiccups, of course. Neighbors have to rally volunteer efforts to maintain the land, holding their own fundraisers to set up picnic tables or trash bins. Governmental cooperation often comes with red tape and perplexing rules. For example, one patron wanted to donate a flag pole and knew where he'd like to have it. City of Houston park rules, though, require that it be near a building — Willow Waterhole doesn't have buildings. Eventually, a shelter went up, qualifying as a structure so the flag pole could be installed.

Burhans and other board members spread the word among Scout troops that this park would welcome Eagle and Gold Star projects. More than 60 have been completed there, and they're all commemorated with plaques at the Dabney Kennedy Scout Pavilion.

Projects have ranged from a selfie stand in front of a picturesque spot to art murals, land clearing, a dog water station, wildflower plantings and even small benches that have been built.

"You just keep working at it. It's like raindrops. Enough raindrops move a river, and rivers can move mountains," Shanley said of the effort it has taken to grow Willow Waterhole into what it is today. "It was so obvious that in a city the size of Houston, we didn't have nearly enough park space. These things have the opportunity to become jewels. The whole Bayou Greenway vision grew out of thinking differently about the bayous."

"Projects like these come about through partnerships. They can be informal, but it's people listening respectfully to one another. Most of the bayous have a citizen advocacy group and most are purely volunteer, folks getting together on a Sunday afternoon or after work to create a vision for their bayou and their neighborhood."



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St. Catherine Convent can be seen beyond Triangle Lake, at the Willow Waterhole Greenspace in Houston.