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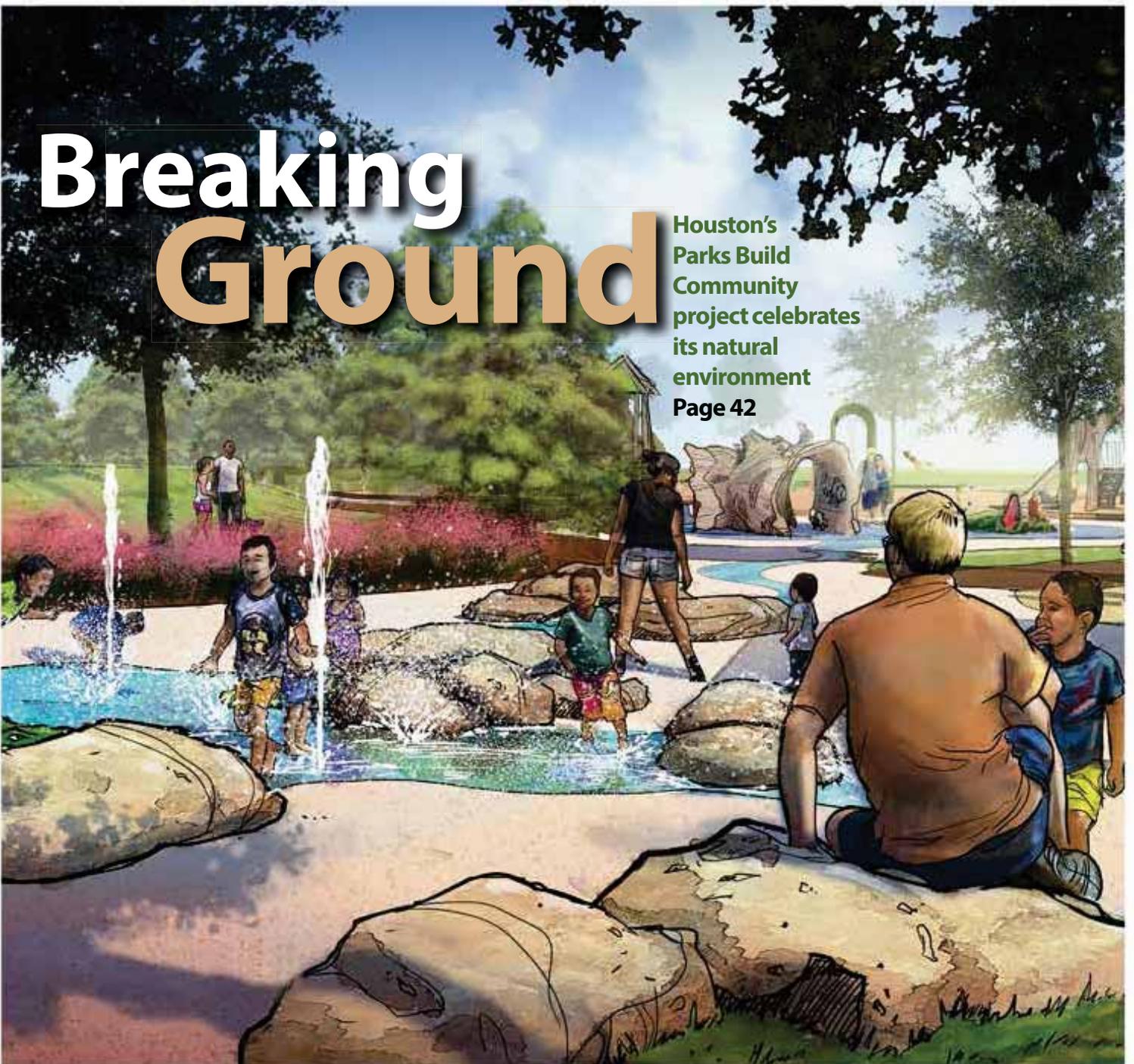
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Breaking Ground

Houston's
Parks Build
Community
project celebrates
its natural
environment
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Breaking Gro



Rendering courtesy of Merrie Talley, RLA

A detailed concept drawing of a park. In the foreground, a man and a woman are walking away from the viewer on a paved path. To their right, a man and a woman are sitting on a wooden bench. Further back, a person is walking on another path. In the background, there is a large, open grassy area with a wooden gazebo structure. The scene is set under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The word "und" is written in large, light-colored letters across the top left of the image.

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The Parks Build Community program takes on its biggest park yet, turning a flood-prone area into an attractive amenity for an underserved Houston community.

By Danielle Taylor

Looking at the concept drawings of Shady Lane Park as it will appear later this year, it's hard to imagine that much of this open landscape was once a high-density housing community destroyed by a tropical storm. Beneath the vibrant colors and inviting playscapes of the nature-based design, it's difficult to visualize that once, this park didn't have the sounds of laughing children running around on its playgrounds and fields. Even now, when assessing the park's simple but highly appreciated offerings, it's a little incongruous to picture a totally changed scene in just a few short months.

But Shady Lane Park has surprised people before, so for the north Houston community where this park is located, it's not that difficult to believe in change for the better.

NRPA's Parks Build Community (PBC) initiative was launched in 2009 as an opportunity to revitalize one park each year in an underserved community and showcase the transformative power that parks



Houston Parks and Recreation Department

Tom Norquist, GameTime's senior vice president of marketing, design and product development, shows off Shady Lane's plans to one of the neighborhood's youngest members.

can have on their locales. Time and again, this has proven to be true. In 2009, Washington, D.C.'s Marvin Gaye Park, which had been dubbed "Needle Park" by locals, was transformed through \$400,000 in donations for a new playground, an extensive cleanup and beautification effort, and relevant education and job-training programs for neighborhood kids. In 2011, Atlanta's Selena Butler Park was selected due to its rich African-American history and its major repair needs following a devastating tornado. It too became a phoenix rising from the ashes thanks to \$1.5 million in upgrades and a renewed level of enthusiasm from its community. Last year, in an area of Los Angeles where children had no other open places to play, the neighborhood of El Sereno welcomed an entirely new park, again thanks to the many

partners and dedicated neighborhood members who came together to establish a safe, inviting place for the community to enjoy. In all three instances, the surrounding communities have taken full ownership of their parks and continue to sustain them, long after the ribbon-cutting is over.

Like the previous parks selected as PBC projects, Shady Lane Park began its makeover well before it was ever considered as a candidate for the program, indeed, before PBC ever existed. In the true spirit of the PBC initiative, this project focuses on transforming an underserved community park through partnerships between the community, the county and the city. The Shady Lane Park project will be a part of an extended green space created by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD), the Harris County Flood

Control District (HCFCD) and the City of Houston Public Works and Engineering Department (PWE).

If you ask HPARD Director Joe Turner about the project, he'll say Shady Lane is the perfect example of how you can change the quality of life for a neighborhood by providing them with improved parkland. He'll also say that Shady Lane Park is a perfect example of how partners working together can recover from disasters in a spectacular way.

Shady Lane Park was acquired by the city in 1958, and the 12.4-acre park sits south of Halls Bayou in northeast Houston. In 2001, Tropical Storm Allison came ashore, and in its trek inland, it stalled over Houston, dropping nearly 20 inches of rain in five days and flooding many neighborhoods throughout the city, including approximately 13,000 homes in the area around Halls Bayou. Following the devastation, HCFCD, the agency responsible for flood damage reduction plans and the infrastructure of Houston's many rivers and bayous, bought up the land for \$11.5 million. PWE later built the 68-acre Bretshire Stormwater Basin on the site to store approximately 512 acre-feet, or 167 million gallons, of stormwater and reduce flooding risks and damages for those who live along Halls Bayou. At the same time, the Bretshire Storm Basin project will create green space and parkland that abuts Shady Lane Park. For the general public, the effect will be a seamless expanse of green space to be enjoyed, which also provides flooding mitigation when needed.

"When NRPA asked us what park would fit into the PBC model, the first park that came to mind was Shady Lane," said Turner. "The potential is here. The community is on board, our partners are engaged and committed to the project, and as a de-

partment we're excited to be able to make this park a great place for the community we serve."

Official planning for the project started in October 2012, and NRPA and HPARD quickly brought in local landscape architect Merrie Talley to start working on the design. Talley had worked on several HPARD projects over the years, and the agency felt confident she could plan and execute a totally innovative design unlike anything else in the Houston parks system. From the start, the plan was to center the design around water to highlight the significance of Houston's bayou system, particularly to this specific plot of land. More than just a place to play, the planners wanted to include a strong but fun educational element in the park that would teach visitors about the role the adjacent basin and wider bayou system play in the overall well-being of Houston.

"To me, Shady Lane Park is a fabulous story of how the people took back what's theirs."

— Garth Welch, Division Manager, HPARD

Lisa Johnson, parks program manager with the City of Houston's General Services Department, soon became the main point person for the project. The project, built along one of Houston's (often called the Bayou City), many bayous, will be one that brings nature and the environment to urban youth. The popularity of PBC has helped the project grow quickly to incorporate a number of partners.

One of these essential partners was the PlayCore GameTime brand, which Rich Dolesh, NRPA's vice president of conservation and parks, looped into the project in its early stages. PlayCore has contributed to every PBC initiative since the program's inception, and the company was quick to sign on to the Shady Lane project as well.

"The story line of Shady Lane from a design standpoint is that it will be a gateway to nature," says Tom Norquist, GameTime's senior vice president of product development, sales and marketing. "We will be doing an incredible thematic built environment near the community center that will transcend to the natural environment, all built around the elements of play."

The design features colored poured-in-place surfacing that resembles a stream flowing toward the basin. At its genesis, a spraypad

Shady Lane Park's new design will include numerous kid-friendly play elements that will teach visitors about the region's natural ecology.



Rendering courtesy of Merrie Talley, RLA



Houston Parks and Recreation Department

Park planners held highly attended meetings with community members to incorporate local opinions into the park's design.

(shown in detail on the cover of this issue) will include several fountains and a small, natural-looking pool surrounded by boulders where kids can splash and play. Two artificial alligator heads will be lurking along the edges of the spraypad, providing climbable elements that also teach about the wildlife of the area.

“Downstream,” the central part of the design features a third alligator and a large hollow log (shown on pages 2 and 3), both of which kids can climb on and in. The log will be six feet high inside and will have little carved raccoons and other local creatures peeking out from knots in the wood. Since this climber is so tall, it will be surrounded with engineered wood fiber as a safety cushion. Next to that, two more hollow trees offer stairs and slides, providing traditional play elements inside structures that are anything but. Two swingsets complete the central part of the design.

The simulated stream culminates in a wetland with native plants irrigated by the graywater from the upstream splashpad. Within the

Based on the community's response before the park is even built, there's little doubt that they will continue to take ownership of it and be good stewards of the park's resources.

wetland will be a fully accessible simulated bayou boat (shown on page 42) intended to be used as an outdoor education classroom that

can fit up to 30 students. Beyond the end of the stream will be a walkway that will go toward the edge of the basin, where visitors can check out the wildlife and read interpretive signage explaining the purposes of the basin and Houston's geography. Ultimately, a small shelter will be constructed at the end of the walkway overlooking the basin, though this component may not be in place in time for the October 10 dedication ceremony.

“We hope this playscape will provide a real psychological benefit to the community,” Norquist says. “This will be a place where children will want to have their birthday parties and families will want to hold reunions. This will bring the community together. We can get excited about all of the amenities and what an exciting place this will be, but what's most important is what it does for society.” GameTime is custom-designing and installing the alligators, trees, log, boat and other play equipment for this project, all of which go toward a \$100,000 in-kind donation provided by the company.

Outside of the central constructed component, the rest of the park will feature the existing community center, a small covered pavilion near the spraypad, paved walking trails along the edges of the constructed playscape and the perimeter of the park, a large multipurpose sports field with lights by Musco Lighting (funded in part by a 2011 United States Soccer Foundation Field product credit grant) and dozens of new trees.

Funding and support for this undertaking came from a number of sources, and Turner is quick to credit the partnerships that made this renewed park possible. In addition to the in-kind contribution from GameTime and the leadership and connec-



Shady Lane Park's current setup includes a small covered pavilion (not shown), a covered basketball court (left), a traditional playground (center), a recreation center (right), paved walking trails and open sports fields.

Danielle Taylor

tions provided by NRPA, HPARD has committed approximately \$1.2 million to the project, which includes a \$220,000 Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Urban Outdoor Recreation Grant funded with stateside dollars from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Talley Landscape Architects provided discounted staff design work for the project and the renderings at no cost, and M2L Associates provided pragmatic design support to ensure that Talley's concepts could be brought into reality. HCFCD will be managing the adjoining Bretshire Stormwater Detention Basin, which served as a main inspiration for this project. The Houston Parks Board has worked diligently to secure private funding and grants for this project, so far gathering \$100,000 to go toward overall costs. Trees for Houston is working with a nursery to

secure a donation of the 200 trees to plant. The Student Conservation Association will assist the project with youth crews and the coordination of the community volunteer day. Lastly, Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Jack Mormon and the City of Houston Public Works and Engineering Department continue to provide support to the project as well.

During the early stages, park planners brought in members of the community to gather input and ensure the final design would be welcomed by the surrounding residents. Based on the community's response before the park is even built out, there's little doubt that they will continue to take ownership of it and be good stewards of the park's resources. "Every time we have a community meeting, the center is packed," Johnson says.

Once this park is complete, the next step will be to connect it with other parks along Halls Bayou via an extended paved walking/biking trail, making it easier for the wider community to access this park and enjoy its amenities. Public demand for this plan shows just how far Shady Lane Park has already come and gives a highly optimistic glimpse toward its future.

*Stay tuned for details of the Shady Lane Park dedication ceremony, which will be held on October 10 during NRPA's Congress and Exposition in Houston. For updates and additional information, visit www.nrpa.org/About-NRPA/Initiatives/Parks-Build-Community/Shady-Lane-Park-Revitalization. **

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