RECREATION AND LAND USE

by

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A two column heading in the December, 1977 issue of Texas Monthly sounded the warning "The Condos are Coming!" The reference was to the building of high-rise condominiums, this time on Mustang Island. At least three projects are under way and more are in the offing because "...the many investors and developers have paid bundles for their pieces of the island and are not going to leave it the way they found it." And why shouldn't condominiums be where building them offers the highest return? They probably should be.

But, we are beginning to recognize the "highest return," especially for recreation development, involves a much more complicated array of land use factors than previously. On-site factors continue to be important to the investor/developer, but increasingly he is impacted by many external factors.

The relative freedom to make decisions on-site continues. Private recreation development today still follows generally the pattern of farm development. If a farmer could more profitably plant wheat than maintain grazing grass, he did so. If a recreation developer could more profitably build condominiums than raise cattle on beach frontage, he did so.

However, today, the implications of these decisions are more far-reaching, and many citizen groups, businessmen and political leaders are calling attention to the off-site social, economic and environmental impacts of such recreation development. Frequently this is being translated into legislation, such as the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 and subsequent
rulings. In the face of growing development of both tourism and recreation, worldwide and in Texas, it is well to ask who will take leadership in improved land use—the private or the public sector?

Worldwide, recreation and tourism now rank high in political and economic decision-making. For the first time in history, in 1977, world tourism outpaced arms expenditures—$360 billion for domestic and international travel and $300 billion for arms. In spite of inflation, high costs of living and increasing costs of fun, recreation and recreational travel continue to grow in contrast with general economic fluctuations.

While no one has precisely measured recreational impact in Texas, some important clues can be found. Recreationally, Texas has risen from comparative obscurity to one of the leading states of the nation in only the last few years. For example, the Texas Department of Highways and Transportation reports that over 17 million out-of-state visitors came to Texas in 1976, spending some $3.1 billion. Looking at recreation in another way, it is estimated that some 326 million activity days are spent annually in outdoor recreation activities in Texas. The 1975 comprehensive outdoor recreation plan for Texas states that almost 54 percent of all urban resident households participated at least once in at least one of the major outdoor recreation activities. Recreation is big, and is big business, and we need to understand better its role in our economy.

As growth of both recreation and non-recreational development takes place in Texas, it becomes increasingly evident that land use problems are not caused by greed, avarice or environmental spite on the part of developers, but are a result of a general lack of understanding of the dynamic interrelatedness of all development.

This was not a problem until recently when juxtaposition of land
development became more the rule than the exception. Where and how a housing developer builds his project impacts not only upon the immediate land he develops but also upon the subsequent needs and desires of the occupants of his housing. Where and how an industrialist developer builds a plant impacts not only upon his immediate land but also upon the future needs and desires of the entire range of employees, from administrators to every facet of labor. These needs and desires of residents and employees will include, as never before, the right to their leisure, expressed in recreational development, time and discretionary income. And, this strong interdependence between recreation and all other development is ever changing. It is dynamic. Yet, our institutions tend to treat recreational development in a static way. Once we have built a park or a subdivision, we tend to think the problem of recreation is solved.

What elements of this dynamic interrelatedness between recreation and all other development seem to be least understood?

First, recreation development and land use are frequently considered the singular prerogative of government park and recreation agencies. Instead, the decision makers of recreation development, in reality, are pluralistic. Approximately 85 percent of all outdoor recreation land is owned and managed by the federal government, but two other forces are very important. Non-profit organizations, nationally and in Texas, are very strong developers and managers. And commercial enterprise plays a major role in recreation facilities and services and will probably play more of a role in the future. Little understood is the interface between the policies and practices of these three sectors.

Second, in many ways, development seems to be the antithesis of desirable recreational settings. Businesses have become the target of environ-
mentalists and other groups. Generally misunderstood is the fact that all recreation, even wilderness appreciation, demands some development and management. Environmental research is demonstrating that even when natural forces are left to operate, environmental erosion may become severe. Therefore, all sectors of developers are beginning to recognize the importance of good design and management. The way in which development takes place is more important than either developing or not developing land. In other words, land use problems are not solved by allowing land to revert to some "natural" or pristine stage of pre-man development. And, development problems have not been solved by political segments taking a dogmatic stance of anti-development.

Third, there appears to be a prevalent attitude among many segments of the public that only governmental agencies can exercise "proper" land use, especially for recreation. Perhaps this arose from the depression-born entrance of governments into vast recreational and park developments in the 1930's. Because financial returns were not of paramount interest, governments were able to amass vast areas rich in natural resource assets, such as forests, wildlife and waters. However, the private sector is increasingly showing sensitivity to resource assets and incorporating good land use in their plans, such as a Walt Disney World, Williamsburg, Sea Pines Plantation and Six Flags Over Texas. Furthermore, professional designers are being employed in greater numbers, not only by government park agencies, but by the private sector to create appropriate, attractive, functional and least erosive development.

Fourth, over the years, with increased fragmentation of professionalism and trades, it seems that the ultimate users of development are forgotten in the decision-making process. As yet, public involvement
generally remains a press phase, often relegated to token approval of plans already decided upon by the developer.

The interdependency of the many segments of land use for recreation is dramatized by following a user through his recreational experience—on vacation, on a weekend or even an afternoon. Involved is land use development which goes way beyond the provision for only his recreation activities. Included is his transportation from home to the recreation area, perhaps transportation within the area, maybe lodging, often entertainment, very likely food service, perhaps guide service and frequently the purchase of many items needed for his recreation such as camera film, sports supplies and souvenirs. The provision of these often demand special resource assets and special relationships between services. Furthermore, all need infrastructure development, such as water supply, waste disposal and power. Thus, the development for recreation needs understandings of many complicated land use relationships.

If the interrelatedness and dynamic flux of land use are not well understood, how can enlightenment be accomplished? Some might reply that new legislation is needed. Others might suggest greater governmental funding and control. While both may be needed, a more acceptable approach in Texas might be that of private sector leadership.

As future development and construction takes place in Texas, the role of recreation land use predictably will take on greater priority than ever before. The challenge to the private sector is to recognize its opportunity to provide leadership and guidance for its own land use decisions. The challenge to the public sector is to interrupt the free market mechanisms as appropriate processes for deciding land uses only when there are strong and compelling reasons. The evidence of improved indi-
individual sites--better siting of buildings, better planning for circulation and better landscape design--can now be translated into better land use planning on a larger scale. This, of course, demands a collaborative effort at the planning stage.

During past construction booms the friendliness and hospitality of Texans, the extensive welfare concerns of business and other organizations and the protection of its natural and cultural assets on balance have been maintained. With a commitment to better land use planning by the leaders and members of the private sector, these can be maintained in the future.