

# Trinity River COMMON VISION Program A Decade of Progress ... A Decade of Opportunity

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For most of the past 150 years, the dream for the Trinity River was that of a navigation canal with barges transporting goods more than 300 miles to and from the Gulf. An 1898 promotional button proclaimed the dream: "Dallas – The Inland Seaport of Texas."

When that dream died in 1981 because of changing federal priorities, it was replaced by unrelated requests for federal Section 404 permits to reclaim portions of the Trinity River floodplain for development. Studies by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers showed that the cumulative effects of the various development scenarios would bring massive new flooding, which naturally caught the attention of local governments. In 1989, a Steering Committee of elected officials from 14 affected jurisdictions, working under the auspices of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, formally declared their support for a new Trinity River **COMMON VISION**:

- **SAFE** Trinity River, with stabilization and reduction of flooding risks
- **CLEAN** Trinity River, with fishable and swimmable waters
- **ENJOYABLE** Trinity River, with recreational opportunities linked by a Trinity Trails System within a "world-class" greenway
- **NATURAL** Trinity River, with preservation and restoration of riparian and cultural resources
- **DIVERSE** Trinity River, with local and regional economic, transportation, and other public needs met

Unprecedented cooperation, combined with state-of-the-art technical tools and on-the-ground implementation projects, have produced a decade of stunning achievements – capped in 1998 by the Trinity River COMMON VISION being named as one of the top 20 *Innovations in American Government* by the Ford Foundation.

## **SUCCESSFUL INTERGOVERNMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS**

One key to our success has been meaningful intergovernmental partnerships – among local governments themselves and with federal and state agencies. Early in the COMMON VISION program we realized that whatever is done to reclaim or preserve a river corridor in an urban region requires local government action – zoning, permits, capital expenditures, maintenance. While the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal/state agencies have important roles, local governments are responsible for the overall health, safety and welfare of their own citizens.

Anything and everything that the Senate Natural Resources Committee can do to protect and strengthen the lead role of local governments as "stewards" of their river corridors is needed.

But local governments cannot and should not act alone; thus the importance of partnerships:

- First, NCTCOG signed interlocal agreements with the 14 entities to serve as their administrative agent. These are: cities of Arlington, Carrollton, Coppell, Dallas, Farmers Branch, Fort Worth, Grand Prairie, Irving, Lewisville; counties of Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant; Tarrant Regional Water District; and Trinity River Authority. Each entity has an elected official on the Steering Committee.
- In August 1990, NCTCOG executed a cost-sharing agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to undertake a multi-year multi-million dollar “feasibility study” that has been hailed as a model across the nation. This massive ongoing effort is guided by an Executive Committee made up of the Steering Committee members in cooperation with the Fort Worth District, USACE senior leadership. It serves as the foundation on which new opportunities can be explored, with 50% federal participation.
  - The \$8 million first phase of the feasibility study, which concluded in 1996, identified more than 100 projects that could justify federal cost-share participation.
  - The ongoing second phase, at \$12 million and growing, identifies implementable projects through Project Management Plans to reduce flood risks, restore environmental values, and meet other study purposes, as outlined later in this testimony.

Various state agencies have been valuable partners in the COMMON VISION. For example:

- Texas Water Development Board has been an important cost-share partner. The TWDB provided half of the local cost-share, in the amount of \$1.875 million, for the first phase of the Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study through 1996. In July 2000, the TWDB approved \$375,000 for half of the non-federal cost-share participation in the Big Fossil Creek Watershed Study, which is an implementation project in the second phase of the feasibility study.
- Texas Parks & Wildlife Department has provided funding directly to various local governments for park and trail activities along the Trinity River.
- Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission is the regulatory agency for local stormwater discharge permits, and has provided opportunities for local stakeholder involvement in its many activities.

Other creative intergovernmental partnerships have emerged through the COMMON VISION process, such as:

- Stream Team – upon request from a local government or developer, this innovative initiative brings federal and state agencies together to provide technical advice on flooding, streambank erosion and similar issues, at no cost, prior to regulatory review. This has been a resounding success.
- Floodplain Administrators Roundtable - NCTCOG initiated this quarterly roundtable in January 2001 to foster communication among those responsible for floodplain management activities and to promote the exchange of technical advice and information about existing and proposed policies that affect floodplains in North Central Texas.
- Memorandum of Understanding with National Park Service – for several years, the National Park Service had a professional staff member at NCTCOG’s offices to assist with greenway planning and funding opportunities.
- FEMA Certification Training – for the first time away from their headquarters, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has conducted week-long certification training for local governments in cooperation with NCTCOG. As a direct result, Texas is now leading the nation in Certified Floodplain Managers.

## SOUND TECHNICAL TOOLS

The Senate Natural Resources Committee has already received testimony from various agencies on the importance of sound technical tools for sound floodplain management – updating floodplain maps, sharing information on proposed permitting decisions, community education, etc.

We could not agree more, and have already demonstrated the importance of these tools as part of the Trinity River COMMON VISION program.

- Floodplain Mapping - The Trinity River corridor is about 240 square miles – about ¼ the size of the State of Rhode Island! One of the first products of the program in the early 1990's was state-of-the-art digital photography and computer mapping of every habitable structure in the floodplain. At its time it was one of the most ambitious efforts ever attempted in the nation, at a cost of about \$2.5 million.
- Assessment of Flood Damages - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used this new photography and digital mapping in computer modeling to assess the feasibility of a wide range of flood damage reduction alternatives. If a Standard Project Flood were to occur, more than 22,000 homes and 140 million square feet of business property would be damaged, with more than \$4 billion in damages and untold loss of life. And every structure that would be damaged is shown on the maps!
- Stabilization of Flood Risk through CDC Process – The studies called for stricter regulation of development within the corridor to stabilize the flood risks. After several years of detailed discussions, an innovative Corridor Development Certificate (CDC) process emerged in the early 1990's. Local governments still issue the development permit under the National Flood Insurance Program, but common requirements have been added (and adopted by each city in its floodplain ordinance). The CDC process:
  - applies consistent and specific regionwide criteria, such as no rise in the 100-year flood elevation and maximum allowable loss of valley storage;
  - includes USACE review of every CDC request for its flood impact;
  - gives every other local government along the corridor 30 days to review and comment upon the development request; and
  - makes NCTCOG responsible for tracking the process

While the individual city still makes the final call, it is well understood that a bad decision will land it in court with other cities.

- Updated FEMA Flood Insurance Maps – Because of the accuracy and precision of the COMMON VISION mapping, it was submitted to FEMA in 1998 as a flood insurance restudy of the Trinity River floodplain. FEMA, recognizing the unique nature of this mapping, integrated this Trinity River product into its overall Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) updates of Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant counties. These insurance maps were released last year and offer a tool of unprecedented accuracy and detail for local government decision-makers in the region.
- Floodplain Management Video – NCTCOG has produced a 22-minute video, "Effective Floodplain Management of the Upper Trinity," to educate local officials and citizens on flooding issues facing their communities and some ways they are working together to resolve them. It is narrated by NBC 5 Chief Meteorologist David Finrock and features the music of Texas Blues legends "T-Bone" Walker and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Funding support was provided by FEMA and the USACE.

## REAL ON-THE-GROUND SOLUTIONS

We recognize that all the cooperation, mapping, and videos will still not reduce flood impacts when the big storm occurs. Thus the focus of the second phase of the feasibility study has been to enable local governments and their partners to implement real on-the-ground solutions. While more money from the state is always welcome, any new legislation must enable, not hamper, implementation of real solutions. For example, counties need the authority to incorporate the future condition of a floodplain into their National Flood Insurance Program administration, and to deal with NFIP substantial damage limitations for structures in unincorporated areas.

When a feasible project is identified, NCTCOG facilitates the preparation of a detailed Project Management Plan (PMP) between the local government(s) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on a 50-50 cost-share basis. The Executive Committee approves the PMP and the institutional structure to oversee the project. Once the project has progressed to the implementation stage, separate agreements are executed between the USACE and local government(s) to put the project on-the-ground.

Recognizing that implementation can take many years, projects are in various stages. We are providing the Committee with brief supplemental status reports for each project. In summary:

- Arlington Johnson Creek Buyouts – more than 140 structures are scheduled for demolition as part of the Johnson Creek flood damage reduction portion of the project.
- Dallas Floodway/Elm Fork – as part of the larger city efforts, several floodway initiatives are being investigated by the USACE, including: raising the existing levees, lake development, channel meandering, modification of a bridge, and recreation facilities.
- Fort Worth Master Plan – Tarrant Regional Water District with Fort Worth Stream & Valleys is developing a master plan to preserve and enhance over 70 miles of river corridor. Pier 1 and Radio Shack have recently announced new headquarters to be built on the edge of the Trinity River downtown, with possible river realignment under study.
- Big Fossil Creek Watershed – the nine local governments in this fast-growing, 73 square-mile watershed are together beginning to evaluate flood damage reduction, environmental enhancement, water quality, and recreational opportunities.
- Lake Worth – Fort Worth is seeking solutions to water quality and sedimentation problems in Lake Worth.
- Trinity Trails – in 1996 the Trinity Trails Advisory Committee adopted a proposed alignment for the 250-mile “spine” of the regional Trinity Trails System. Significant segments have already been built or are under development.

## A DECADE OF PROGRESS ... A DECADE OF OPPORTUNITY

The 1990's have been a decade of almost unbelievable progress – cooperation on a scale unmatched elsewhere in the nation. Yet our local governments and their federal and state partners recognize that there are incredible opportunities still ahead in this decade.

Under the Texas state strategic planning process, VISION is defined as “an inspiring picture of a preferred future.” A safe, clean, natural, enjoyable and diverse Trinity River is our COMMON VISION for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*For more information, visit <http://www.dfwinfo.com>*