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### ***Urban River Rescue***

**By Lee Pilgrim, Editor, Texas Water Resources**

The urban river is the "most often abused resource on earth" laments Roy Mann in his book, RIVERS IN THE CITY.

As noise, smoke, congestion and filth became the hallmark of cities, the greensward and natural amenities of suburbia became the magnets for urban growth. As a result, the urban waters (and most cities were built on waters), essential to defense for the ancient city and critical to commerce for the medieval and industrial city, were abused an almost forgotten. Many were converted to giant sewers lined with the city's trash. Frequently, they became the core of urban blight.

Cities like San Antonio, however, have proved that the urban river's image can be different. Instead of being a target of abuse, it can be the focal point of pride and pleasure in a city.

The San Antonio River Walk, first reaching its high degree of development and popularity in the late 60's, is now visited by civic leaders throughout North America as an outstanding example of what can be done. The River Walk is more than a tourist attraction, more than a city park and more than an enjoyable place to visit--although it is all three. It is a park-business mix, a new kind of civic amenity, that has turned the city core inside out. It demonstrates that the downtown core can compete with suburbia, both as a pleasure spot and as an economically viable location.

Because the San Antonio River Walk appeared to be something special, it prompted research to discover its special characteristics and its lessons for other cities. Therefore, two studies, sponsored by the Texas Water Resources Institute and directed by the Recreation and Parks Department of Texas A&M University were initiated. The first, CULTURAL BENEFITS FROM METROPOLITAN RIVER RECREATION--SAN ANTONIO PROTOTYPES, analyzed the unique characteristics and social value of the River Walk. The second, URBAN RIVER SETTINGS FOR TOURISM--RECREATION

USE, analyzed several U.S. city water fronts to discover both pitfalls and desirable guidelines for development.

Together, these studies prove that a redevelopment of urban core waters holds great promise for cities throughout North America, Clare Gunn, principal investigator of the studies, pointed out.

### ***A Great Thing***

What's so special about the San Antonio River Walk? Other cities have more extensive waterfront parks and other cities have much greater amounts of lakes and rivers.

For one thing, the River Walk is neither pure park nor pure business core; yet is much more because it draws upon both. It therefore represents a new and special type of park-business amalgam that is not popularly known or understood by either park or business specialists.

Second, one can find a diversity of activities here that is not typical of the usual city park. Planning has not been so rigid nor so sterile that it serves only one function. The lure of interesting shops and places of entertainment is as important as the atmosphere and beauty of a botanical garden. As a consequence, a much wider range of age, income and cultural categories of people make use of the River Walk than is typically found in a city park.

Third, in spite of diversity, there is a dominant environmental and developmental theme, clearly Spanish-American and semi-tropical. The verdant growth and the architectural details provide a unity that clearly identifies this as a special place.

Fourth, few civic amenities can boast the strong support, not only from outsiders but from the voters themselves. They know the River Walk as "a great thing." Contrary to other city parks elsewhere, there is no criticism of the fact that over 74 percent of the visitors are from outside San Antonio. "We take all our visitors to the River." "I love it; I go as often as possible." ". . . appreciate just knowing it's there." These are typical comments from a survey of San Antonio voters.

Fifth, contrary to general opinion of citizens and civic leaders elsewhere, the River Walk is a dramatic example of the success of joint effort. While many cities wait for that single funding agency, that single leader and that single concept to solve all planning problems, San Antonio did not wait. It went ahead with what it already had. An what it had was motivation and a strong ability to collaborate and cooperate, even among conflicting forces. Over six major agencies and organizations, representing both private interests and governments, are responsible for both planning and management of the River Walk.

### ***A Special Place***

A pleasant balance of park-like setting and commercialism provides both the tourist and the local citizen a delightful special place for relaxation and relief from the congestion of the city core.

A landscape analysis of the River Walk indicated that it could be divided into four environmentally-cohesive but discrete areas. Area "A" contains landscaped walkways along the river but no shops. It offers open space and footpath linkage between the core and upper San Antonio. Area "B" is functionally more of a destination area that is heavily verdant and yet is flanked by a few hotels, a library and a hospital. Area "C" offers a pleasant landscape setting and features many shops, restaurants, hotels and places of entertainment. Area "D" is entirely man-made, excavated in 1968 to link the horseshoe with a new civic center complex of theater, exhibition building and arena.

### ***The Future***

"The apparent success of the River Walk might suggest that future success is equally assured," Bunn says. "Many factors would support this assumption. Its popularity, its established reputation, and its continuing high levels of management policy portend a bright future, indeed."

Researchers found that, in addition to these positive facts, the River Walk could be vulnerable to changes that might detract from its continued success. This is no more than one would expect from such a dynamic city area with complicated functions.

Present land uses adjacent to the River Walk are reasonably compatible. However a large percentage of the contiguous land owners have not made changes to their properties for many years and remain oriented to the city streets rather than the River Walk. Future private development on these lands could either support or detract from the present delicate balance of park and supporting business.

As new development takes place, each new activity presents a new test of both physical and esthetic harmony. Constant vigilance in collaborative management is needed to cope with these ongoing modifications.

The image of the downtown area as a high crime district continues in the minds of some local citizens in spite of the immaculate record of the River Walk itself.

Occasional heavy rains produce runoff water quality that discolors the river, lessening its esthetic appeal. This apparently has not depressed attendance but is a problem that may be solved through other flood control measures in the future.

### ***Why Not Elsewhere?***

The second study showed that many cities have lacked the special circumstances of San Antonio and therefore have made little progress in the development of their waterfronts.

Some reasons cited for their lack of progress follow:

- Lack of flood control--an unstable water level.
- Over-engineered channelization, precluding a park-like waterfront.
- Lack of support from downtown business interests.
- Lack of public understanding of landscape and planning proposals.
- Over-protective environmental constraints.
- Narrow and poorly-conceived plans.
- Lack of financial support.
- Lack of leadership and organized effort.

### ***Three-Phase Guidelines***

Cities that have made progress seem to vary greatly in their approaches. Even so, research showed the desirability of using certain common guidelines. For whatever value they may have for other cities, the following have been deduced from overall observation, consultation with planners and research study.

#### **Preliminary Investigation**

Look for the assets within a five-minute walking distance of downtown core, observe the water stability, and make preliminary check of flood control measures.

#### **Detailed Investigations**

Motivating forces include: 1) conservation and beautification interests, 2) business and tourism interests, 3) park and recreation interests, 4) property owners who see the opportunities for a major park-business complex, and 5) evidence of potential leadership and political commitment.

Site factors present these questions: 1) To what extent does present development preclude park/business development? 2) Does the water resource have esthetic potential? 3) What does an evaluation of the water quality, fluctuation, depth, flow, and waterlife reveal? 4) Can esthetically pleasing controls solve the water flood problem? 5) Are there atmospheric problems that must be dealt with locally? 6) How many historic buildings and sites need restoration and development? 7) Do the open space, soils, and topography allow a quality landscape redevelopment?

Influential factors to be considered are 1) land price problems, 2) obstacles that would cause excessively high redevelopment costs, 3) problems of land assemblage, 4) new transportation needs, 5) problems present i outside factors, and 6) land use control obstacles.

#### **Planning and Implementation**

- Have both social and economic aspects been considered?
- Are the tradeoffs--a new park/business complex versus present uses of land--worth the effort and cost?

- Does the financial planning show feasibility?
- Do the people involved in planning represent adequate scope?
- Do the plans allow for gradual shift rather than "clean-sweep" renewal?
- Are the designs concepts realistic and functional as well as creative and imaginative?

In addition to San Antonio, eight U.S. cities were investigated in the second TWRI study: Flint, Houston, Indianapolis, San Jose, San Diego, Seattle, Wichita, and Lansing. Researchers learned that in five cities, the reaction of a perceptive person triggered interest in rejuvenating the river area. They were a conservationist, an architect, a planner, a landscape artist, and a journalist.

If individual sensitivity will continue to stir up general awareness that prompts action, more and more cities will rescue and develop intra-city waterways to the overall enhancement of the city.

"Let us manage them well," charges Roy Mann, declaring that "riverside, more than any other catalyst, hold the greatest hope for beginning a revival of confidence in the urban physical environment."