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POST OAK

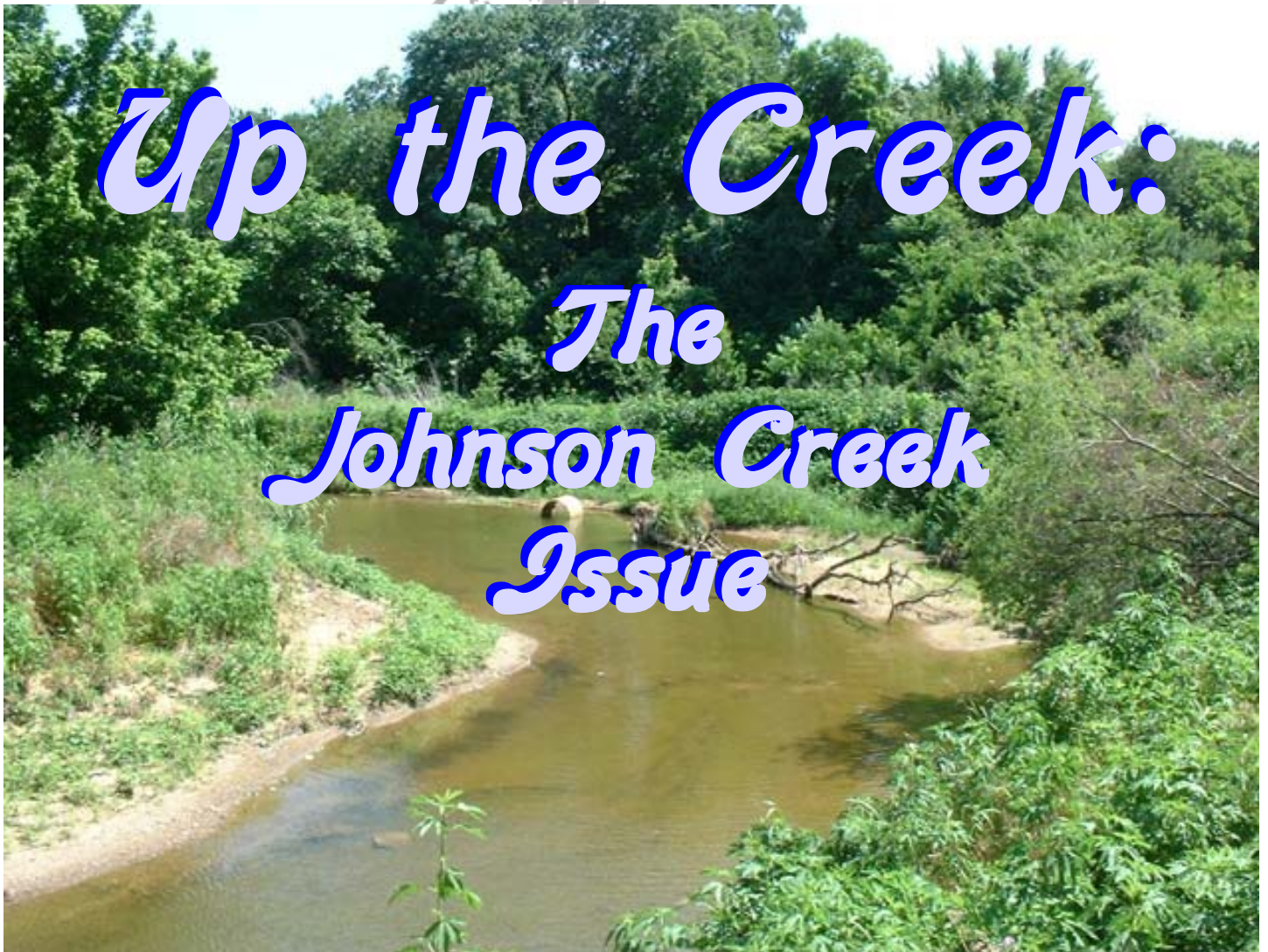
WORKING TO CONSERVE ARLINGTON'S NATURAL RESOURCES

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Up the Creek: The Johnson Creek Issue



A long, meandering story. Hope? Despair? What next?

This issue of the *Post Oak* is devoted to the trials and tribulations of the waterway that has been most closely associated with Arlington's history. Surely Johnson Creek's location has been its curse in terms of habitat destruction, water quality, erosion, and siltation.

Of course, the same things have happened to streams, rivers, lakes, and bays worldwide. All it takes is settlement and development close to water, and that's just where people have always wanted to settle. The Johnson Creek story is an emotional one for many of us, but it's far from unique.

Johnson Creek's troubles probably began over 150 years ago. Today, we can only hope that bits and pieces will survive in some diminished state.

Certainly it's long past time to dream of a natural corridor through town.

This Johnson Creek story contains bits and pieces from the past and

Just how many things can we do to one creek? Here a sewer line crosses near the confluence of Johnson and Trading House Creeks.



questions about the future. There are many omissions, and I apologize to all those not named who struggled at one time or another to help the creek and its plants and animals.

This issue focuses mostly on the last 10 years or so. A lot has happened since 1995, and drastic changes have occurred in just the last few months. The Johnson Creek saga is mostly a tale of loss that culminates in the dramatic structures of the Dallas Cowboys stadium and Glorypark town center. Those developments will change much more than the creek.

We despair at the most recent habitat losses in that area of massive development, but we must look for hope where we can. Will we find it in the latest Johnson Creek plan? Some of our most experienced members think not, and their opinions must be respected and carefully considered. However, I want to find reasons to hope, so for now I place my remaining bit of trust in the expertise of the consultants and in the attitudes and talents of our Parks Department staff. May they serve the creek well.

John Darling
Editor

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Julia and the Creek Julia Burgen

Note: It's hard to imagine anyone who has given more time and effort to Johnson Creek issues over the years than Julia Burgen, former ACC President and outstanding environmental activist. Her article doesn't just reflect the frustrations many of us share; it details the tangled recent history that will shape the creek's future.



The extensive *Star-Telegram* article with photos and graphics on "Reinventing Johnson Creek" published on July 16, 2006, was an admirable effort by

Neil Strassman to shed some light on changes to the creek that have been simmering, hidden for over a year.

While I should be pleased that the listing and photos of "Key Players" started off with me, I am no longer a key player in the reinvented Johnson Creek, despite my efforts from about 1989 through 2003.

I came to that involvement following many years of advocacy on sound floodplain management issues.

By 1985, increasing development in the Trinity's floodplain finally moved the Army Corps of Engineers to hold a hearing on the problem that threatened to overtop the Dallas levees with the next big flood. I was the person at the February 12 1985 meeting who said, "The Metroplex does not have a beach, or a mountain, or a canyon. The only natural feature we have to tie this area together is the river." That comment was used many times in the ensuing 15 years, during which the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the river towns and the Corps hashed out a plan.

From 1989 on I became concerned about problems along Johnson Creek caused by longstanding failures to keep development out of the floodplain.

I was a key player in the 1995 effort that led to the city's decision against a

concrete channel for the creek from Park Row Drive to Mitchell Street. And I was a key player in the public process for making a plan to deal with the problems caused by a creek in the middle of much unwise development.

As a member of the Arlington City Council beginning in May 1997, I was a key supporter of both sales tax elections to fund the Johnson Creek Corridor Plan. The first ballot, in May 1998, probably would have passed, but for the Smithsonian and art interests that were added two months before the vote.

With the failure of a second sales tax vote in January 2000, the Corps

public parkland and purchased with tax money.

I retired from City Council after three terms in May 2003. Then came the voters' approval of the Cowboys Stadium project in November 2004, although those who voted yes were probably not aware of voting on anything related to Johnson Creek.

In January 2005, I asked city officials and staff what effects the stadium project might have on the approved Johnson Creek Ecosystem Restoration plan. I was told there would be none, that the Corps of Engineers had been authorized to continue their ecosystem work on those 90 acres. A portion of that land

required no remedial work. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had previously rated the land north of Sanford as Resource Category 2—high quality wildlife habitat.

Yet very soon changes occurred in the city's planning. Despite my experience in river and creek issues and especially Johnson Creek, my expertise

was not sought. What transpired over the next year was done out of the public eye.

[Editor's note: Around this time the Cowboys were planning massive changes along the west side of the creek; the city was laying out new roads for the stadium; and Steiner + Associates proposed to build a large town center whose western edge would be close to the creek. Steiner and the Rangers contracted with Applied Ecological Associates to draft a new plan for Johnson Creek.]

The original Johnson Creek Corridor Plan was a model of public



and the city used funds from a federally approved project to buy out 144 homes built in the creek's 25-year floodplain. This \$26,000,000 project was mostly aimed at flood damage reduction with ecosystem restoration and some passive recreation. It was the largest project of its type in the United States.

Homes were purchased and undeveloped land was bought to add to flood water storage and to restore the creek's damaged ecosystem. Included were 90 acres north of the railroad track and south of Randol Mill Road. These acres were considered

Julia and the Creek continued from page 3

involvement, but the new Johnson Creek Conservation Plan has had no formal public input. It was finally revealed at a City Council work session in March 2006.

In June 2005 Arlington Conservation Council members were invited to a meeting at which consultant Mark O'Leary from Applied Ecological Services discussed his work for the Rangers and Steiner to deal with siltation at the Rangers lakes and erosion of the creek near their parking lot. It was evident that the meeting was not open to the general public and that the press was not wanted.

Texas has a law that allows cities to sell public parkland, but only with voter approval. However, in the 2005 legislative session a curious thing happened. A bill was passed that removed the requirement for an election. This allowed cities to transfer public parkland to a venue project without voter approval, and it happened without park supporters anywhere knowing about it.

It was convenient that this bill became effective in June 2005. In August 2005 I learned that legislation was moving through Congress via Representative Joe Barton to remove the 90 acres of parkland from the Johnson Creek plan and transfer it to the stadium project.

Within a month, Arlington Mayor Pro tem Ron Wright was confirming that the transfer was happening, but we heard no explanation about how it could be done. He did say, however, that not all of the 90 acres would probably be used, and that some of it might be returned to parkland. Many of

us were very concerned about the possible fate of the high quality wildlife habitat in that area. To at least a few people who asked, Mr. Wright seemed to indicate that none of the 90 acres would be used for parking lots.

On February 14, 2006, this item appeared on the evening agenda at City Council: "Dallas Cowboys Development Project-Amendment to Lease Agreement – Second Amendment – Authorizing the execution of a Second Amendment to the Cowboys Complex



A tranquil view of Johnson Creek in the general vicinity of the Cowboys stadium. How will it look in the future?

Lease Agreement with Cowboys Stadium, L.P."

When the minutes for that council session became available, that item was detailed as: "Councilmember Patrick made a motion to a resolution authorizing the Mayor to execute a Second Amendment to the Cowboys Complex Lease Agreement with Cowboys Stadium, L.P. to add approximately 22.49 acres of land previously identified for the Johnson Creek project with no option to purchase."

Why was this transfer of public parkland hidden in executive session? Those acres contained the superior wildlife habitat. They were clearcut by the time the minutes told anyone what was happening, and in their place will be a parking lot for the Cowboys.

The U.S. legislation deauthorizing the 90 acres indicates that the land will be replaced elsewhere in the city. One of the possible sites includes the old Snider Auto Salvage land on West Division. To replace excellent wildlife habitat with that damaged land would be a travesty. And money will have to be spent to purchase some of the replacement 90 acres. The taxpayers have already paid once for the original 90 acres. Now we must pay again? Even if some of the 1997 Park Bond money is used for the purchase, the taxpayers will still be paying twice for that acreage.

Phase I of the reinvented Johnson Creek Conservation Plan addresses funding only for work from the railroad track north through the baseball property. The *Star-Telegram* article on July 16 listed the total amount for Phase I as \$12.5 million, with 65% federal funding and 35% city funding. A note indicated that the Texas Rangers and the Dallas Cowboys have each pledged \$1.9 million toward the city's share. And where does the federal funding come from? You already know: from all of us federal taxpayers.

[Editor's note: See page 10.]

How and when funding will occur for the bulk of the creek south of the railroad track through Vandergriff Park—as detailed in the new plan—is anybody's guess. Cost for that is estimated at \$27.5 million. The odds are very low that Phase II of the new plan will get done. And there's a fundamental problem: It's just common sense to solve upstream problems before spending millions downstream. We're told, however, that all the construction in the stadium area requires that the downstream creek work be done first.

I wish to reiterate, that I am not a key player in or a supporter of the reinvented Johnson Creek Conservation Plan. I had nothing to do with it and was not consulted about it. To my way of thinking, this new plan represents the opposite of good open government.

It Sounds So Simple An overview from the Dallas County Historical Web Site

"Johnson Creek rises near Interstate Highway 20 in eastern Tarrant County and runs northeast for 13 miles to its mouth on the West Fork of the Trinity River, within the city limits of Grand Prairie in western Dallas County. The stream, which is intermittent in its upper reaches, was probably named for Middleton Tate Johnson, who in the early 1840s settled at Marrow Bone Springs, which he renamed Mary Le Bone Springs, about three miles south of the present Arlington City Hall. Johnson owned a great deal of land in eastern Tarrant County and founded Johnson's Station near the creek. ...The creek, which flows through Arlington and Grand Prairie, has been altered by much urban development along its banks. It forms the northern boundary of Six Flags Over Texas, an amusement park."



The manicured approach at the Franciscan apartments provides "the finest in lakeside living." The blue thing in the middle is Johnson Creek, all dressed up.

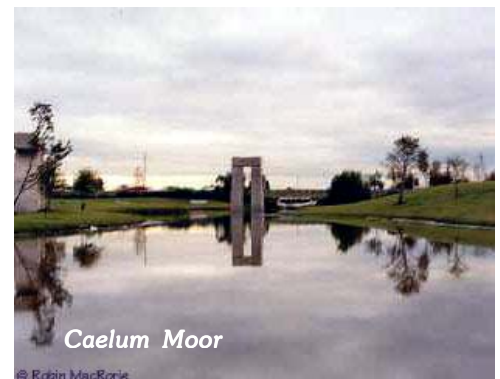
Over the prairie...
Johnson Creek once arose as a simple stream in the prairie.



Johnson Creek in Vandergriff Park. The prairie is gone, along with the original streamside vegetation.

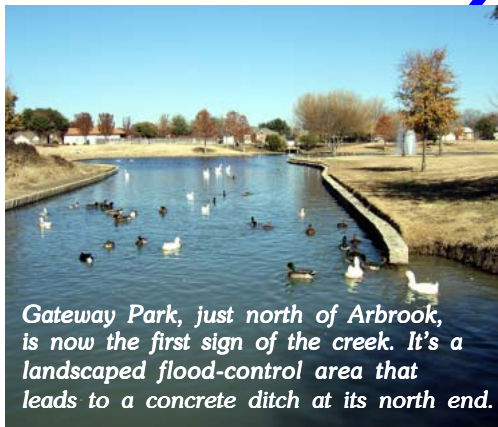


Looking south from Waverly at the remains of Johnson Creek, downstream from Gateway Park.

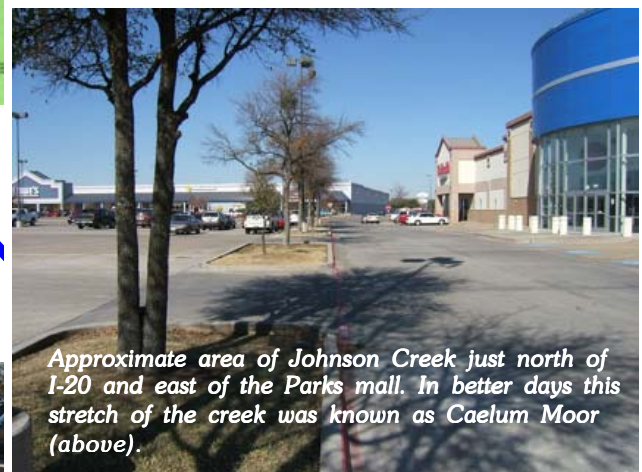


Caelum Moor

© Robin MacRorie



Gateway Park, just north of Arbrook, is now the first sign of the creek. It's a landscaped flood-control area that leads to a concrete ditch at its north end.



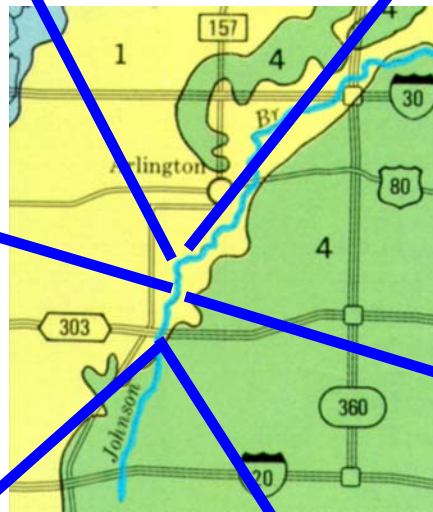
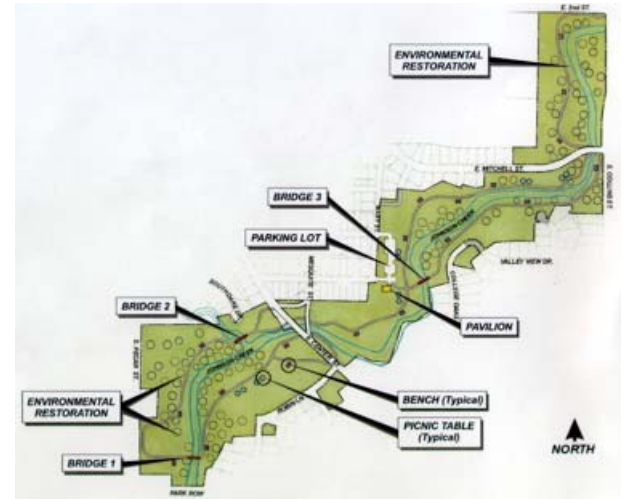
Approximate area of Johnson Creek just north of I-20 and east of the Parks mall. In better days this stretch of the creek was known as Caelum Moor (above).

Left, Looking south toward I-20 from the photo above. Could this grate be the new headwaters of Johnson Creek? It's a low point in the parking lot, so maybe it is the improved origin. Not quite like finding the headwaters of the Nile...

And through the woods...



Probably the best remaining stretch of Johnson Creek's wooded habitat is found in Julia Burgen Park, although it's not clear how much will be left if the latest plan is implemented. Left, the treeless result of channel widening at the Center-Mesquite bridges. Right, an early map of the park. Center left and right, there are significant variations in the quality and quantity of habitat in Julia Burgen Park.



Left and right, just north of Vandergriff Park Johnson Creek leaves the prairie and enters Founders Park, a small, heavily disturbed remnant of the stream's first encounter with post-oak woodland. Despite its condition, the park is recognized as an important area for migrating songbirds. In these photos the creek overflows its banks after a rain in March, 2003.



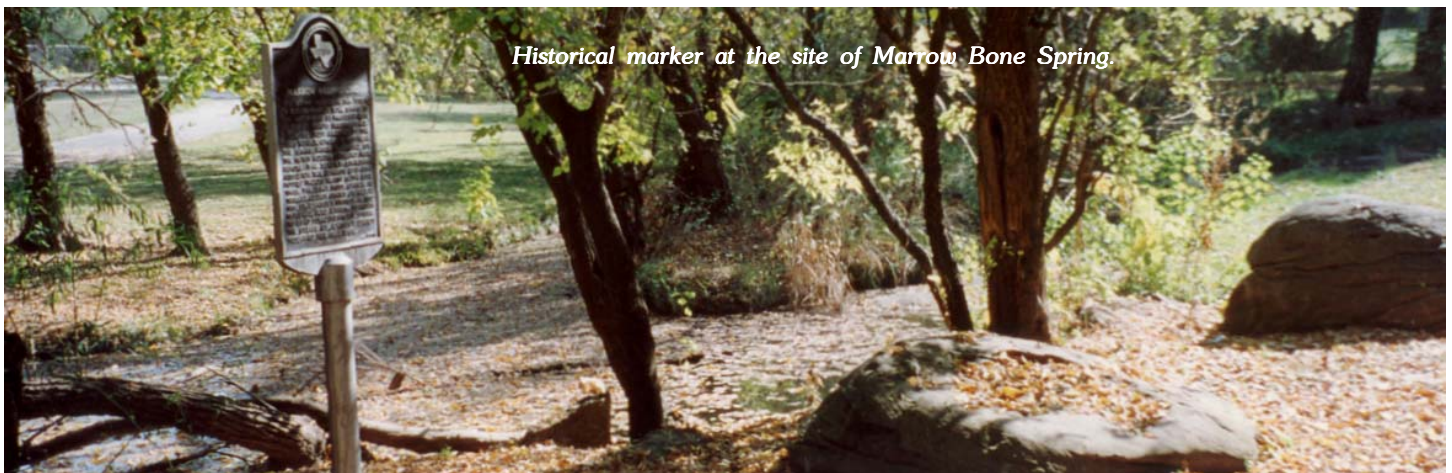
Thoughts from 30 years past *John Blair*

One early memory I have of Johnson Creek is from the late 1970s, when I was President of the original Arlington Conservation Council (namesake of our much more active present-day organization). One of our field trips was a long walk up and down the west side of Johnson Creek south of Park Row, behind the Lutheran Church. At that time the area had already been devel-

oped in housing on both sides, but on the west side the houses and commercial developments along south Cooper had not yet been built into the 100-year floodplain, so there was a sizable area of riparian woodland remaining. We were led on a walk to admire what was left that could be preserved, including many mature oaks, elms, and pecans. I especially remember finding a

large bee tree with an active colony of native honeybees. Already development had occurred much too close to the stream channel on the east side of the creek, especially in the section north of the Mill Creek addition, where lots of rubble fill had been used to raise the ground level, thereby impacting water flow on the west side.

from the walkway in Founders Park. Unfortunately it's not a very edifying sight, as the springs are a sorry remnant of their former flow and usually littered with trash. I often wish something could be done to restore the springs visually, although I realize nothing can be done to restore their flow now that so much of the recharge area has been filled with houses and



Historical marker at the site of Marrow Bone Spring.

oped in housing on both sides, but on the west side the houses and commercial developments along south Cooper had not yet been built into the 100-year floodplain, so there was a sizable area of riparian woodland remaining. We were led on a walk to admire what was left that could be preserved, including many mature oaks, elms, and pecans. I especially remember finding a

I believe much of this woodland on the west side of Johnson Creek south of Park Row remains today, and the potential exists for saving it as greenbelt like the stretches north of Park Row and south of Arkansas Lane.

By the way, the stretch from Arkansas Lane to Vandergriff Park was purchased, in very small part, with funds donated by the 1970s Arlington Conservation Council. When we disbanded, we donated all the money left in our bank account for that purpose. Only a few hundred dollars, but it was something.

In that stretch, also back in the '70s, I remember being led to a point where we could view the remains of Marrow Bone Spring (AKA Mary Le Bone Spring), the spot where European settlement in this area first started back in the 1840s with Middleton Tate Johnson's trading post and later his plantation. This can be viewed today

paved with streets and parking lots. This is possibly the most historic single spot in Arlington and has been abused so badly. Only the site of Bird's Fort would be comparable, but that site is in dispute as to its precise location and inaccessible to the public, whereas the springs between Matlock and Johnson Creek are still there, still visible, and quite accessible.



Trash from Vandergriff Park collects in Johnson Creek at Founders Park.



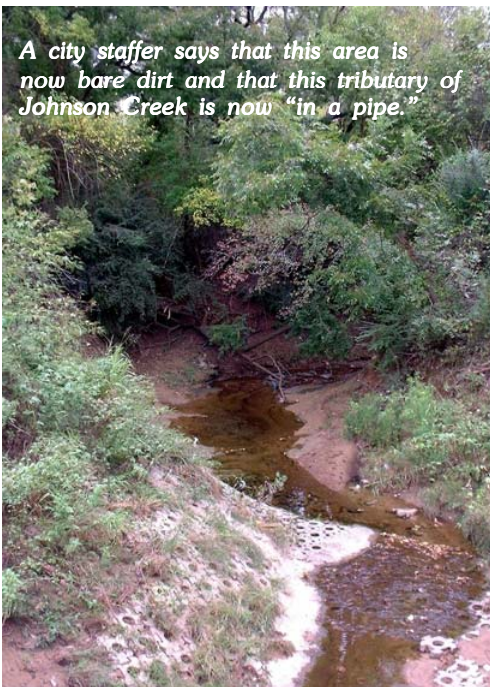
Beavers near Marrow Bone Spring make their mark on the creek's numerous willows.

End of the line or not too bad?

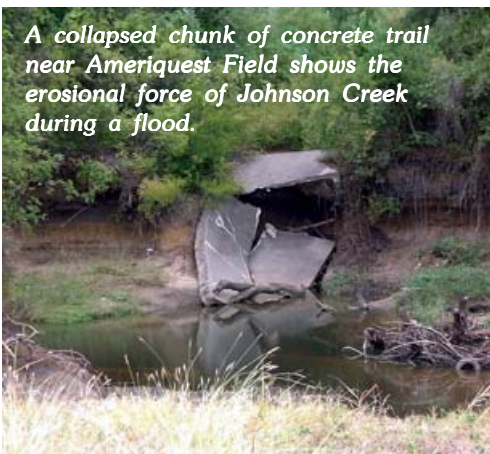
Johnson Creek



You can't make an omelet...



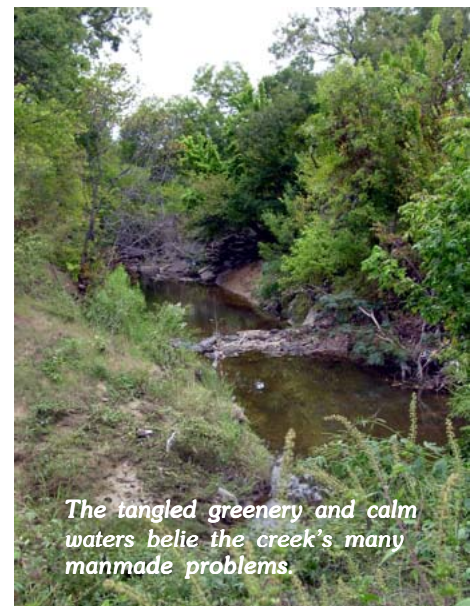
A city staffer says that this area is now bare dirt and that this tributary of Johnson Creek is now "in a pipe."



A collapsed chunk of concrete trail near Amerquest Field shows the erosional force of Johnson Creek during a flood.



Above, Cowboys stadium and parking lots appear in blue, and Glorypark almost surrounds Amerquest Field. The remaining wooded stretch of Johnson Creek winds between them, and its artificial, denuded ponds lie between the ballpark and the city convention center. This is part of the creek that would be managed in the Phase 1a plan.



The tangled greenery and calm waters belie the creek's many manmade problems.

Q&A: From the latest public creek meeting

On October 9, 2006, there was a public meeting on the latest Johnson Creek developments. City staff and the creek consultants, Applied Ecological Services, addressed a variety of questions. On December 18 city staff emailed the document that is excerpted here. Phase 1a refers to the anticipated first stage of the creek plan. Some audience members questioned the wisdom of working downstream before fixing upstream problems.

Has Applied Ecological Services (AES) consulted on any projects in Texas?

Not as a company, but key AES employees have project experience throughout Texas, including botanical inventories and community assessments, reviews of noxious weeds, landfill and mine reclamation projects; investigations for a wetland bank in the Houston District of the Army Corps of Engineers, a lichenological investigation for the National Institute of Health, and Phase I and II environmental assessments. In addition, AES has retained a local expert in native plants and riverine ecology and will utilize local Stream Team expertise to ensure that plans are appropriate for this region and climate. AES will also have the benefit of local engineers who have specific experience with Johnson Creek and were primary authors of the 1997 Johnson Creek Corridor Plan.

How much public input has been obtained in the last 18 months that AES and the City have been working on this project?

The City is just beginning the formal public input process as part of the project design process. During the conceptual design phase (Conservation Plan), which was completed last spring, public presentations were made to interested stakeholders including the Arlington Conservation Council, Parks and Recreation Board and City Council.

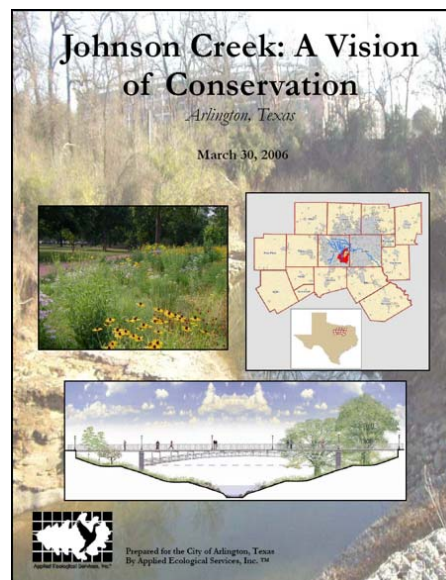
How much space will there be between the Cowboys' parking lot and the creek?

This distance will vary with the meandering of the creek. At the most narrow point, just north of Sanford, this distance is an estimated 30 feet

(edge of parking to top of bank). At its widest location, the distance is nearly 500 feet. More exact information in this regard will be available this spring.

Will there be trees replanted or native plantings in that area?

Yes, a large number of native trees, bushes, grasses and flowers will be planted to help stabilize soils, restore habitat and visually enhance the park.



Is it up to the Cowboys to design for run-off of the parking lots or will the City's design through AES address this?

Both projects are addressing this issue. The Cowboys are designing their storm water collection system and the City is working to mitigate any detrimental impacts of the anticipated creek flow and velocities at discharge locations.

How does the study differ from the study paid for by Steiner? What is this costing the citizens of Arlington?

The Johnson Creek Conservation Plan is a conceptual plan that provides the framework for a specific design solution. This plan was jointly paid for by Steiner + Associates and the Dallas Cowboys. The current work (AES contract), which will also be funded by Steiner and the Cowboys, is a specific design that will provide all of the engineering, permitting and construction documents. The design for Phase 1a of the project is expected to cost \$780,000. This expense will be fully covered by contributions from Steiner and the Dallas Cowboys.

Is Phase 1a useful if subsequent phases cannot be funded?

Yes. The proposed sedimentation basin, additional flood storage capacity, and the bank stabilization efforts in Phase 1a will reduce the severity of these issues in the Entertainment District and will stabilize creek banks to prevent future meandering which threatens the adjacent park property.

How is each phase funded, and what is the cost share between City and Federal in each phase of the project?

Funding for the full cost of Phase 1a construction has not been formally identified or authorized. Steiner and the Cowboys have each agreed to contribute \$1,945,000 to the project. One option under consideration is to include Phase 1a under the financing arrangements that are being proposed for other infrastructure improvements within the entertainment district. This includes a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone and a Public Improvement

Q&A: *continued from page 9*

District. If the proposed improvements become part of an authorized federal plan, much of the Johnson Creek plan will become eligible for federal funding. Federal funding is typically authorized at 65% federal and 35% city.

Is any property being removed from the floodplain in this project?

Yes, some floodplain is anticipated to be reclaimed by both the Cowboys and the Glorypark development projects. This land will be used for parking and roads.

How can the project proceed if funding has not been appropriated for Fiscal Year 2007?

The design portion of the project is proceeding with a combination of funding from Steiner and the Cowboys. The City is currently considering alternative funding sources for construction, estimated to begin in the summer of 2007.

It is discouraging that the corridor has seemed to shrink in width. In addition to bioengineering, what other techniques will be used to accommodate this narrower stream corridor? What percentage of the creek will these techniques apply to?

AES is following numerous design guidelines to maximize preservation, enhancement, and restoration of existing vegetation and wildlife habitat, maximize public enjoyment of the open space, reduce erosion and sedimentation, minimize flood damage, incorporate natural features, and favor low-maintenance, high-quality vegetation within the footprint provided. All aspects of the restoration project, including stream restoration and park development, will be accessible for passive recreation on a variety of scales, thereby improving overall quality and use of the space that is available. Bioengineering techniques are anticipated to be used to stabilize bends in the main creek channel and in constructed overflow channels. Retaining walls or landscaped terraces will be applied where steep slopes must be maintained to accommodate trails, save trees, and maximize width of green space.

The plan states that the project must be maintained for five years. What will this consist of? How much will it cost, and who will pay for it?

While the construction contractor will be required to repair and/or replace defective work for a period of approximately three years (reduced from five),

routine and periodic maintenance will be required in perpetuity. This cost is being estimated and will be a significant annual expense. The City will be discussing options for a cost-sharing agreement with Steiner and the Cowboys. Maintenance activities will include removal of trash and debris, sediment removal, irrigation repair, replacement vegetation, erosion control, etc.

Will the Parks and Recreation budget have to absorb the cost?

It is not expected that the Parks and Recreation Department will have to absorb this cost out of its current budget. A shared arrangement is likely, including a budget request for the City's share of the expense.

Who is going to pay for the removal of silt from the Cowboys' and Ameriquet Field detention ponds?

The assignment of this responsibility has not been determined, although the Texas Rangers are currently responsible for maintenance of the ponds north of Randol Mill Road. Pond maintenance will likely be included in any negotiated maintenance arrangement. The disposition of existing silt in the south pond will be addressed in Phase 1a construction, since restoring the creek in the area is an integral part of this project.



Don't miss the next Johnson Creek Meeting

Here's the latest invitation and your chance to make yourself heard:

Our next public design review meeting will be January 9th at 6:30 at the Parks and Recreation Department, 717 Main Street. We will be giving a short presentation and then open up the discussion for questions and comments. I hope that many ACC members will be able to attend.

Gordon Robertson, Manager
Park Planning, Design and Construction
Arlington Parks and Recreation Department

Two big things, two attitudes

Many months ago Grace Darling put together some information on green stadiums and began working to get it into the hands of Cowboys officials. At least three elected city officials promised to see that this would happen, but the Cowboys never responded.



Now that we have been granted a look at this monument to entertainment, we can react variously to its scale and appearance but one thing is clear: Not one word has been written about the structure's sustainable features. This at a time when experts work to predict the year when our exploitation of the earth's resources

drastically exceeds its ability to supply our basic needs.

The Cowboys organization has also ignored the fundamental wisdom of parking structures in favor of gigantic parking lots. This wasteful decision brings us back to the Johnson Creek story. Some of the best natural habitat in Arlington has been destroyed to put up parking lots close to the creek. A shameful waste, and another huge opportunity lost.

On the other hand, we seem to detect a far different attitude from the developer of Glorypark. Jim Kwasnowski, Vice President for Development of Steiner + Associates, recently made it clear: "Johnson Creek is an asset to the community and an asset to Glorypark." He sees the creek as a natural buffer to the acres of football parking on the west and speaks keenly of the creek's amenities—its attributes as

borrowed landscape to complement the development; its function as a cultural promenade; and its ability to provide dramatic overlooks.

Kwasnowski described Johnson Creek as "another front door" to Glorypark that would enhance its appeal.

Kwasnowski's words convey hope; he sums up his attitude with this quote: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized."

Daniel Burnham, Chicago architect. (1864-1912)



Closing thoughts John Dycus

In recent years we've seen plenty of conservation failures; now we can choose to hope that some good things will happen to our poor creek. On January 16, 2000, following the second failed Johnson Creek election, John Dycus wrote some things we must remember:

Dear Johnson Creek family,

You will never know the exhilaration of a victory that you've earned ... without risking the sadness of a loss you didn't deserve. This is one such loss.

But as I sit here this morning watching a brilliant winter sun rise over my neighbor's rooftop (the lady is 92, and she voted yes), I feel satisfaction, too, in memories of tireless people who dared to energize their city with an economic freight train of a plan, in the context of conservation, that would one day bring joy while insulating against the heartbreak and property damage of million-dollar floods. I have linked arms with giants, and together we dared to make our city more than it was, more than it knew it could be.

Our city didn't fail us, although, tragically, it failed itself. Nor did we fail it. We told the truth, we fought cleanly and hard, we never quit. We had but one agenda, and it was the one we showed the world. We shunned the politics of stridency and fear, never betrayed our colleagues, refused to embrace negativism as a cheap ticket to fleeting, secular success. Our conscience is clear, our integrity intact.

We have a very real victory, after all, and it's in our hearts, in bonds formed, in a vision shared. And perhaps in lessons learned for the next civic sally when our passion overtakes us and new dreams tumble forth, and first one, then another, says, "Could we?" Yes, we could. Then: "Should we?" Yes, we should. And off we'll go, shirttails flapping, ideas shooting like sparks from a grinder's wheel.

For the dreaming must never cease. Otherwise, we die.

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Annual Potluck
and Business Meeting

January 13, 5:00 pm

Epworth United Methodist
Church

Be sure to visit us at

arlingtonconservationcouncil.org



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