

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Mostly sunny: High 89, Low 61

BONUS
DIGITAL CONTENT

extra



Extra: "The Martian" blends movie fiction with NASA science. See this story in the lifestyle weekly at HoustonChronicle.com/E-Edition
Online: Read an excerpt of "The Promise," a novel set in turn-of-the-century Galveston: HoustonChronicle.com/Promise

WORLD

Russia launches strikes in Syria

In an escalation of the Syrian crisis, Russia launches airstrikes on what it claimed were Islamic State targets but which appeared to hit U.S.-backed moderate opponents of the Syrian government.

Page A2



AFP / Getty Images
Buildings were damaged in an airstrike in Syria's Homs province.

BUSINESS

United CEO issues apology to customers

United Airlines marks the five-year anniversary of its merger with Continental Airlines with an apology to customers who have dealt with the fallout from the rocky union.

Page D1

CITY | STATE

Texans in poll defy state's stereotypes

Texas' reputation as an arch-conservative stronghold may get a fresh twist with a poll suggesting residents are increasingly supportive of gay marriage and legal marijuana.

Page B1



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Arthur Dealty paints the city skyline from Eleanor Tinsley Park in the renewed Buffalo Bayou area.

BUFFALO BAYOU REBORN

By Molly Glentzer

Buffalo Bayou has been abused almost from the moment the Allen brothers came ashore in 1836. Cypresses that helped secure the banks were logged early on, and for most of the 20th century, the polluted waterway reeked.

That has changed rather dramatically, especially at Buffalo Bayou Park, where architects, landscapers, construction crews and donors have completed a \$58 million metamorphosis of great ambition: giving Houston a signature, verdant downtown gateway. Bikers, runners, lovers, dog walkers and young

\$58 million infusion restores long abused green gateway with trails, bikeways in park

families with strollers have all taken note, filling its newly poured bikeways and running trails in ever-increasing numbers.

Texas Monthly has already pronounced Houston "fanatically green." When Buffalo Bayou Park officially opens Saturday, its 160 acres of green space will appeal to almost everyone, with two new visitors' centers, a new nature play

area with rock climbing, plus rolling lawns and manicured gardens that merge into restored woodlands and meadows.

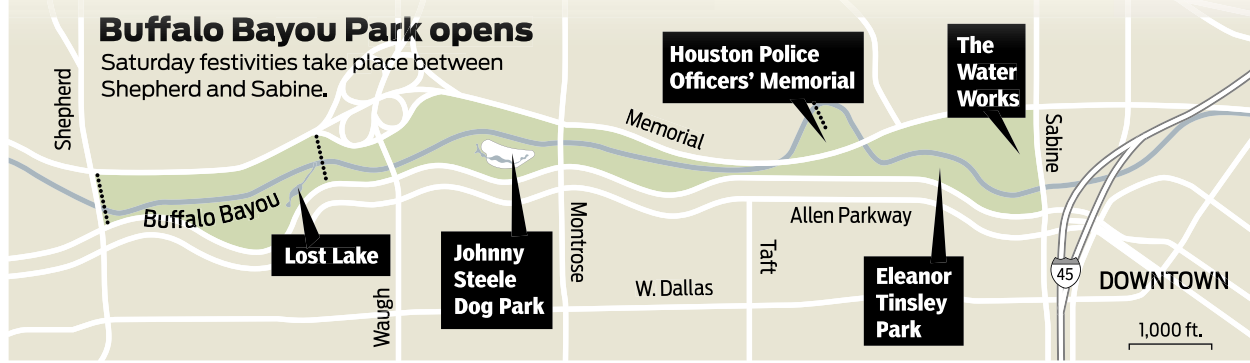
"New York has Central Park and the High Line. Other big cities have their parks, and I feel like this is really nice for Houston," said Khoa Tran one recent afternoon.

He had just finished running 20 sprints up and down an embankment near Sabine Street with his friends Ben Cockrill and Quoc Tran after their workout at a nearby gym.

Kay Duque and Arthur Martinez picnicked on a promontory near the Houston Police Officers' Memorial

Park continues on A14

★ See more photos at HoustonChronicle.com/BuffaloBayou



Source: Buffalo Bayou Partnership

Chronicle

\$10M for seat belts on school buses gone

Without funding, safety measure is pushed aside

By Ericka Mellon

Parents and others fighting to protect children on school buses celebrated in 2009, when Texas lawmakers earmarked \$10 million to equip the vehicles with seat belts.

Yet six years later, the money is gone — with less than half a million dollars ever awarded to school

districts for the devices.

With no state funding designated for seat belts, districts were no longer required to install them, thanks to a loophole in the law. While there's no official tally, most standard-size school buses in Texas lack seat belts. Roughly 35,000 school buses transport some 1.5 million Texas school children daily.

Brad Brown and Steve Forman want people to remember the lost opportunity, especially after the

Safety continues on A12



Mayra Beltrán / Houston Chronicle file

The deaths of two Beaumont students in a 2006 crash led to a state law mandating seat belts on buses, but a funding loophole no longer requires they be installed.

★ More about the crash that left two students dead at HoustonChronicle.com/HISDcrash

Panel: DuPont knew of danger

Safety board cites threat to community

By Mark Collette and Lauren Caruba

DuPont knew for years that hazards at its pesticide plant in La Porte were capable of killing not only workers, but people in the surrounding community, and yet the problems went unabated, according to the U.S. Chemical Safety Board.

The CSB's preliminary report about the release of toxic gas last November, which proved fatal to four employees, was made public Wednesday and contains new details about lax safety practices and faulty equipment at the plant.

Just one of the plant's many chemical storage tanks could have released enough gas to kill neighbors, but DuPont nonetheless removed a protective insulator.

Gas alarms in the four-story building that held the pesticide manufacturing equipment were set at thresholds so high that workers could be injured before they sounded, and while breathing equipment was at the

DuPont continues on A11

Hospital misused Ike funds, audit says

By Cindy George

Riverside General Hospital mismanaged FEMA money received through a \$32 million Hurricane Ike recovery grant by using taxpayer funds to pay for gift cards, general operations and other expenses not associated with storm repairs, a federal audit has determined.

The 27-page report released Wednesday by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General is the latest finding of federal money misuse at the Houston health care institution where executives were convicted in 2014 in a \$160 million Medicare fraud billing scheme.

The audit revealed that gross mismanagement continued after the 2012 indictments, arrests and removals of longtime

Hospital continues on A8

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FROM THE COVER

Park provides a new perspective on city

Park from page A1

morial, sharing a blanket with Duque's dog, Sasha. They came to the park for a casual date on a day off of work.

Duque likes the promontory for its views. Houston doesn't look flat from this vantage point. Downtown's skyline rises to the east, beyond a natural-looking grove of young sycamores, cottonwoods and cypress trees that line the low bayou. The park gives Houstonians a new perspective on the city.

Casual users weren't common at the memorial before the overhaul.

"We really didn't have any reason to come out here until recently," Duque said.

Bridges, visitor centers

Landscape architect Scott McCready of SWA, the project's lead consultant, thinks four new pedestrian bridges that divide the park into five quadrants have helped make it more inviting.

"Before, if you came to the bayou, you were committed to a two- or three-hour journey. Now you can come down for just a half-hour and do a small loop," he said.

The wood, steel and glass visitors' centers anchor each end of the park. Rental kayaks and canoes fill the underside of the Lost Lake center, where Clark Cooper Concepts serves grab-and-go food and operates the Dunlavy, a private event space.

Closer to downtown, the new Water Works center offers bike rentals. A new Sky Lawn with a performance pavilion occupies a hill there. By month's end, sculptor Donald Lipski's trellis-shaded "Periscope" will offer a peek underground into a 2-acre cis-



Jon Shapley photos / Houston Chronicle

Carter Linville and Danielle Zigon watch the sunset in the Jane Gregory Garden in Buffalo Bayou Park. Transformation of the park was set in motion by a \$30 million catalyst gift from the Kinder Foundation.

tern that eventually will hold sound and light art installations.

The private Buffalo Bayou Partnership raised most of the funds to build the park, starting with a \$30 million catalyst gift from Kinder Foundation in 2010. The Harris County Flood Control District contributed \$5 million.

The city, with tax reinvestment zone money, will contribute \$2 million annually toward park maintenance. Previously, the city could budget only \$125,000 for trash pickup and mowing between Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive. Private funding is essential to major park improvements across the city, parks and recreation director Joe Turner said.

Philanthropist Richard Kinder, executive chairman of the energy pipeline giant Kinder Morgan, said



The Carruth Bridge leads to the Houston Police Officer's Memorial. The renewed park has four pedestrian bridges that divide the park into quadrants.

the maintenance agreement was an "absolute condition" to his foundation's gift.

"The last thing we wanted is for this to turn out the way it is right now

and then three or five years from now it turns into a piece of crud because some future administration says, 'We've got other things to do with our money,'" Kinder said.

No matter how much money the city throws at it, Buffalo Bayou will always flood periodically. The park's grand opening was delayed by heavy spring rains and the Memorial Day flood. Storm water scraped the grass from the new Johnny Steele Dog Park, destroyed six sections of asphalt paths and damaged the electrical system for the park's custom lunar-cycle lights, which change color with the phases of the moon.

The park's structures can withstand submersion and floating debris. But the cleanup cost more than \$200,000, project manager Guy Hagstette said. Flood repairs are an expected and important component of the maintenance budget. "We went into this with our eyes open," he said.

A dynamic waterway

Buffalo Bayou formed about 18,000 years ago. Flowing 53 miles from a spring west of Katy to Galveston Bay, it now traverses some of Houston's most populated neighborhoods.

McCready calls the bayou a "stressed natural stream in an urban environment." Especially west of Shepherd, the banks have been impacted for a century by the urbanization of the watershed around them.

City fathers envisioned parkland west of downtown as early as 1910, when landscape architect Arthur Comey advised them the bayou's banks weren't appropriate for much else.

Buffalo Bayou Park at a glance

160
Total acres

53
Acres of woodlands and prairie

14,000
Trees planted

50%
Percentage by which mowing area reduced

80,000
Cubic yards silt cleared during bayou rechanneling

\$2 million
Annual maintenance budget

22
Full-time maintenance staff

3,000
Volunteers who maintained meadows last year

Houston bought what is now Buffalo Bayou Park in 1912.

George Kessler's 1914 park plan included a landscaped mall, golf links, pavilions and a pedestrian promenade, but funds ran out during World War I. A decade later, a similar fate befell an even bigger idea to continue the ribbon of green along the bayou's north banks to Memorial Park.

Flood control methods have evolved drastically since the 1950s, when the Army Corps of Engineers excavated channels into the Buffalo Bayou Park section, also clearing na-

Grand opening

Ribbon-cutting:

1 p.m., Saturday

Live performances:

2-7:30 p.m., the Water Works, 105 Sabine.

Special talks:

2-4:30 p.m., Lost Lake, 3422 Allen Parkway.

Grand finale lighted procession:

"Confluence: A Journey in Five Movements," 8 p.m., on both banks between Sabine Street and the Carruth pedestrian bridge.

Fireworks: at 9 p.m.

See the complete schedule at buffalobayou.org.

tive vegetation.

Extreme erosion just west of the park also impacted the bayou's flow. Most of the property on both banks between Shepherd and Memorial Park is privately owned, and no one has ever agreed on how to manage it. That's where the controversial, proposed mile-long Memorial Park Demonstration Project remains stalled.

To revive the bayou within the park, the Harris County Flood Control District removed 10,000 truckloads of silt that had built up. It also planted about 3,500 of the park's 14,000 new trees to help keep banks in place and used natural channel design techniques to create a more exaggerated oxbow of the bayou north of the Police Officers' Memorial to slow the water's storm flow.

It also moved earth to form meadows for retrieving silt that settles on the banks during floods.

"Any stream is going to regrade itself, but we're trying to bring it into more equilibrium," district executive director Mike Talbott said. "We're trying to help nature do what it wants to do."

He hopes the new park convinces doubters upstream of the good that can be done.

"We're not environmentalists," Talbott said, "but we're flood people who work with the environment."

Growing neighborhood

The park's redevelopment has helped spur at least four major real estate development projects near its perimeter, including luxury apartments and an office building.

The partnership says about 44,000 households are a 10-minute walk from Buffalo Bayou Park, and a half-million people live within a 30-minute bike ride.

Finance trader Noor Sammour is among the thousands of young professionals who live nearby. He usually rides three fast laps on his bike around the bayou after work.

He moved to Houston five years ago from Austin, and Buffalo Bayou Park reminds him of Austin's Lady Bird Lake greenway.

"I love it," he said. "When I first moved here, it wasn't like this at all. There were no lights, no volleyball court, no landscaping. I used to go to Memorial; I think this is a lot prettier."

The Kinders also ride along Buffalo Bayou every weekend.

"I love the concrete trail, but you get down on that asphalt trail and you would never realize you've got cars whizzing by 50 feet away," Richard Kinder said.

Buffalo Bayou Partnership president Anne Olson has a long list of other improvements outlined in a master plan for revitalizing the bayou all the way to the Turning Basin. The park happened relatively quickly because it was public land, but the remaining sectors involve at least 12 property owners through the rapidly-gentrifying East End.

"It will be a very different plan," Olson said.

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Rosemont Bridge is perfect for joggers. Flood control efforts have helped renew the bayou.