

ICE
HOUSE

Seeing Green

Three Houston projects that set a path forward for the city's parklands.

BY LAURA FURR MERICAS

The words "See Water Fills Our Low Places Joining Every Here To Every There" can be seen from above at Bayou Greenways Park.

THE GRASS HAS NEVER LOOKED GREENER at Houston's community parks—figuratively speaking, of course (it is the middle of the Texas summer, after all)—and Houstonians have noticed. Maybe it's just the pandemic's sneaky ability to push us all outdoors, but it seems like everywhere we look neighborhood parks are getting overhauled and new projects are breaking ground. We reached out to a woman in the know to explain our current parks boom: Beth White, president and CEO of the Houston Parks Board. Think of them as the "city parks conservancy," she says, which has worked with the local government, donors, and other nonprofits like itself to bring 14,000 acres of green space to life in the last 45 years, with dozens of new projects currently underway.

And since we're all rearing to explore more these days—"We barely can have the concrete dry before people are out on the trail," says White of the Parks Board's crowning achievement Bayou Greenways (vital update below!)—here are three of those projects to be on the lookout for.



HARTMAN PARK 9311 E Avenue P

Construction wrapped in the spring on a colorful new playground at this green space just outside the East End—the pilot project of Mayor Sylvester Turner's massive initiative, the 50/50 Parks Partners, which calls on the Parks Board, the Houston Parks & Recreation Department, and Greater Houston Partnership to recruit 50 local, private companies to support 50 neighborhood parks around the city and create lasting relationships in the communities. So far, 12 parks ranging from 1 to 15 acres in size have been matched with partners like H-E-B, Chevron, and Perry Homes, that will provide funds and volunteers to support the overhauls. Hartman Park's \$600,000 revamp was supported by Valero Energy Foundation and through park bond funds, for example. Best of all? Houstonians who live near these 50/50 parks actually have a say in the upgrades. "We're really devoted to this commitment to have community input. It really shaped how the park needed to move forward," White says. Listening sessions are now underway to find out what residents would like to see transformed at the remaining 11 parks, including Harwin Park near Asiatown and Tuffly Park in the Greater Fifth Ward, just to name a few.

BAYOU GREENWAYS PARK 1648 Studemont St.

At the confluence of the White Oak Bayou Greenway and the Heights Hike and Bike Trail on Studemont Street lies a one-and-a-half-acre plot that will serve as an outdoor ode to Bayou Greenways 2020, which (in case you missed it) is more than 80 percent of the way toward its plan to connect 150 miles of paved trails and adding 3,000 acres of green space across our city. The \$225 million undertaking has been funded by folks like billionaires Richard Kinder and a \$100 million dollar bond, and is downright transformational for our city.


The Parks Board acquired the vacant land in 2010 from the Texas Department of Transportation and this spring installed a new trail head on Studemont plus wayfinding signage, a poetry wall, bridges, and boardwalks. They also installed sand-blasted artwork that showcases the interwoven network of Houston's nine major bayous—plus, sightlines of the downtown skyline, of course. "It's the nexus of so many different things," White says. "It's really to celebrate this connector that Bayou Greenways has become to the entire city."



THE HILL AT SIMS 3801 Hickock Lane

The Parks Board launched the Beyond the Bayous program with a study funded by the Houston Endowment in 2017 and has since looked for ways to build upon Bayou Greenways 2020 and connect even more Houstonians to green space. Its latest project (and one of the first for the program), in collaboration with Harris County Precinct 1, has secured funding to overhaul a detention basin in Sunnyside into a 100-acre floodable, public park. That's so Houston.



"It's really exciting, especially when you think about the need for parks in the city and also the challenge with flooding," White says. Not only will the regional park help with flood mitigation but it'll likely draw in plenty of Houstonians from all over the city. The design process, which started this spring, calls for pedestrian and nature trails around the waterway. 

HARTMAN AND BAYOU GREENWAYS: ANTHONY RATHBUN; COURTESY HOUSTON PARKS BOARD
HILL AT SIMS SITE: JONJOU SINGLETON, SWA