

# a fort worth renaissance

By J.D. Granger

**T**outed as a “game changer” by Mayor Betsy Price, the Trinity River Vision is capitalizing on Fort Worth’s recent population boom and churning out a project to tackle the next phase of growth. Instead of looking to suburban sprawl, this cutting-edge project is occurring in Fort Worth’s urban core and nearly doubling the size of the central city district.

For decades, Fort Worth has struggled to embrace one of its best natural assets. The Trinity River, which spider webs throughout the entire city, has long been undervalued and ignored. Often an afterthought, the river was put behind giant levees in the 1950s and it was out-of-sight, out-of-mind after that.

All that changed when a small group of local visionaries assembled and decided to put the river back into focus. They decided to dream big and asked what the river could be – from the recreational center of Fort Worth to a vital tool for economic development and everything in between.

From that group came an innovative plan that will transform Fort Worth – the Trinity River Master Plan. At the core of the Trinity River Vision Master Plan is a flood risk management solution and the revitalization

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*This award winning campus, designed by Vancouver-based architecture firm Bing Thom Architects, is home to health care professions for Tarrant County College. This beautiful campus combines education and public spaces while also providing a connection between downtown Fort Worth, the Trinity River, and Panther Island.*

of a long neglected industrial neighborhood in Fort Worth’s central city into a vibrant, pedestrian oriented urban waterfront community adjacent to downtown.

In addition, the plan will expand Gateway Park into one of the largest urban-programmed parks in the nation and enhance the Trinity River corridor with over 90 user-requested projects along the 70+ miles of the Trinity Trails, which spider web throughout Fort Worth and parallel the Trinity River.

## TRINITY RIVER: AN UNSTABLE HISTORY

Fort Worth has a long and turbulent history with the Trinity River. It starts with Major Ripley Arnold founding Fort Worth on the banks of the Trinity River in 1849. What started as a scenic and strategic asset to the city has also proven to be a deadly force as evident in the floods of 1922 and 1949.

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## HOW THE TRINITY RIVER VISION PROJECT IS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FORT WORTH

The Trinity River Vision Authority (TRVA) is the organization responsible for the implementation of the Trinity River Vision (TRV) - a master plan for the Trinity River in Fort Worth, Texas. It is underway now - connecting every neighborhood in the city to the Trinity River corridor with new recreational amenities, improved infrastructure, environmental enhancements, and event programming. The TRV will create Panther Island, a vibrant urban waterfront neighborhood, expand Gateway Park into one of the largest urban-programmed parks in the nation and enhance the river corridor with over 90 user-requested projects along the Trinity Trails.



Public improvements including a bypass channel, flood gates, dams, walkways, and new bridges address flood protection, environmental clean-up, mobility, and recreation. An estimated 10,000 mixed-income housing units, 3 million square feet of commercial space, and over 12 miles of waterfront development are possible after updated public improvements are in place.

During the flood of 1922 the Trinity River flooded over 3,000 acres, killing 37 people and destroying many more businesses and homes. The existing levees, which were constructed after the 1908 flood, did not prevent damage, so they were increased in height following this event.

Then in 1949 North Central Texas was inundated with torrents of rain in the upper Trinity River basin. In spite of the levees constructed after the 1922 flood, whole sections of neighborhoods surrounding downtown were beneath ten feet of water. Thousands were left homeless, ten people died, and property damages reached \$15 million. After the flood of 1949, the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) set up their district office in Fort Worth and began building a flood risk management system on the Trinity River that includes the present levee system.

The federally funded improvements were completed in 1957, including the construction and strengthening of the levees. The plan also straightened the Clear Fork and West Fork channels of the river, which removed the natural meander of the river in favor of a channel system. Thousands of trees along the banks were bulldozed and the levees became barriers that kept people away from the river.

As a result of the levee project, the Trinity River was left a dry, littered ditch for most of the 50s, 60s, and early 70s. In 1971, a group of local citizens formalized as Streams and Valleys, an organization charged with the beautification and recreational development of the Trinity River and its tributaries.

Streams and Valleys commissioned Halprin and Associates to study the Trinity River in Fort Worth, which resulted in the "Halprin Plan." This plan recommended low-level dams to regulate water level, extensive multi-user trail systems, lighting, planting thousands of trees, and vastly improving public areas.

In 2002, the Trinity River Master Plan was designed to provide flood risk management, recreation, scenic beauty, and accessibility to the public. It also is a prevention plan – unlike preceding plans which were drawn up in response to disasters, this plan is designed to avert foreseeable damage and destruction and provide continuing safety. This plan was approved by Fort Worth City Council in 2003, and three years later the Trinity River Vision Authority was formed to manage and coordinate the project based on local partnerships with the city of Fort Worth, Tarrant County, Streams and Valleys, and the Tarrant Regional Water District, working closely with the USACE and the Texas Department of Transportation.

## CAPITALIZING ON PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The most well-known of all Trinity River Vision projects is the innovative plan to create an urban waterfront community to the north of downtown Fort Worth. USACE knows this plan simply as "Central City," but most of the public calls it "Panther Island."



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While having two names can seem confusing, it's really quite fitting for a plan with two major components. The publicly funded portion of the plan, the Central City project, is limited to environmental cleanup, flood risk management, and infrastructure improvements, such as three new bridges, a 1.5-mile bypass channel, isolation gates, dams, a 12-mile vibrant urban river walk, and 33-acre town lake.

Once flood concerns, outdated infrastructure, and environmental issues are addressed, Panther Island will be accessible for private redevelopment of over 800 acres of underutilized land in Fort Worth's central city and connect to downtown Fort Worth, the Cultural District, and the historic Stockyards.

## URBAN REVITALIZATION: RESTORING, REVIVING, AND REINVENTING

The current flood risk management infrastructure was built to support the expected population of Fort Worth in the 1960s. However, over the last ten years Fort Worth has experienced a massive population boom of over 250,000 people (that's 38 percent!) and the infrastructure in place is no longer adequate.

This increase in population has provided great opportunities for our city but it also comes with challenges. With this type of growth, Fort Worth needs to increase its flood risk management system, and thanks to a strategic partnership with the USACE we are able to forgo the levee system of the past and implement an innovative bypass channel that will keep our city safe for generations to come.

In addition to flood risk management, the bypass channel will also serve as a beautiful, urban programmed park. As Fort Worth's population has expand-



*The world renowned firm Hargreaves Associates along with Randall Stout Architects is providing urban planning, landscape design and architecture for the future 100-acre, 1.5-mile long urban waterfront with numerous social and recreational amenities.*

ed, green spaces have not been able to keep up and we are grossly underserved in our park needs. USACE is designing the bypass channel, but world renowned architect Randall Stout and the internationally recognized landscape architecture firm Hargreaves Associates are partnering with local sponsors to help turn the bypass channel into a stunning recreational amenity to support families in an urban environment.

## PANTHER ISLAND: A NEW PLACE TO LIVE, WORK, AND PLAY

Panther Island is an aggressive economic development initiative with public and private improvements that will create the opportunity for housing, employment, education, and recreation in the heart of Fort Worth.

In its early stages, the Trinity River Vision Authority (TRVA) looked to other waterfront projects across North America and judged their success based on how the community embraced them. Instead of reinventing the wheel, TRVA learned from these projects in cities like Vancouver, Oklahoma City, and San Antonio and implemented the most successful approaches into the Trinity River Vision Master Plan.

On Panther Island, land use is regulated through mixed-use zoning promoting a live, work, play environment. A form based code requires private development to conform to design principles that enable a pedestrian oriented, dense neighborhood to function. Minimum height requirements ensure high density, compact urban development in Fort Worth's central city where resources and services are already in place. An envisioned 10,000 mixed-income housing units and three million square feet of commercial, retail, and educational space are planned within the 800 acres. Development Standards allow incentives for the construction of LEED certified buildings and require the use of quality materials in new construction.

Revitalizing and redeveloping the central city and encouraging brownfield redevelopment enhances the environment, reduces blight, brings people and jobs together, and helps to reduce urban sprawl and preserve

### PANTHER ISLAND QUICK FACTS

The redevelopment of Panther Island will completely transform Fort Worth. Below are a few highlights of what this project will bring to Fort Worth:

- 10,000 new mixed-income homes
- 16,000 permanent jobs
- 600 construction jobs per year to complete the project
- Boost Tarrant County economy by \$1.6 billion per year
- Generate over \$950 million in business activity per year
- 3 million square feet of commercial, retail, and educational space
- 12 miles of waterfront just north of downtown
- Expand the central business district by 800 acres



green space in outlying areas. Shared public parking built through public/private partnerships will utilize less space and reduce the need for surface parking.

Native tree plantings along both sides of the new 1.5-mile bypass channel will bring quality of life to an area that had previously been an underutilized industrial area. An innovative storm water management system will manage runoff through a series of canals replacing conventional underground conveyance systems. The canals will provide a continuous public boardwalk, enabling activities along the water's edge.

The future circulation network maximizes connectivity for vehicles, pedestrians, public transportation, and bicycles, promoting efficient circulation and a wide range of mobility options. New roads and bridges will accommodate a future mass transit system that will connect Panther Island to downtown, establishing efficient access. Future local streets will be purposely

narrowed to a small footprint to ensure pedestrian activity and comfort. A circular road around the perimeter will connect development nodes. The new infrastructure combined with the development standards will create an attractive neighborhood with a strong sense of place.

Through enhanced flood risk management, smart growth planning, and critical transportation improvements, Fort Worth is fostering a walkable, high-density, mixed-use neighborhood in its central city, a viable sustainable alternative to suburban sprawl.

## FUNDING THE FUTURE

Half of the funding for the Panther Island infrastructure is anticipated to come from the federal government, 15 percent from the Tarrant Regional Water District, 6 percent from the city of Fort Worth, and 3 percent from Tarrant County. A full 27 percent will come from the tax increment financing district (TIF) the city of Fort Worth established for the project in 2003.

Multi-agency funding for this type of project is extremely rare. Generally there is one or two – such as a federal partner – but the TRV project has a minimum of three federal pockets to get money from and a minimum of three local, nonfederal agencies sponsoring it as well, plus a TIF.

## WHO'S IN CHARGE?

TRVA is the organization charged with implementing and managing the Trinity River Vision Master Plan. The TRVA is a quasi-government agency that has the same added responsibility as a development authority.

A unique aspect of the TRVA is its management structure. Even though the TRV project has local, state, and federal agencies participating, a vertical manage-



*Panther Island is a forward-thinking solution to Fort Worth's booming population growth and need for additional flood protection. The plan provides the opportunity for high-density, sustainable development along the river – creating a vibrant waterfront community.*

## PROJECT PARTNERS

### **Tarrant Regional Water District -**

TRWD is a political subdivision of the state of Texas charged with providing flood risk management within Tarrant County and water supply. TRWD incubated the project and has provided significant funding and leadership.

**Trinity River Vision Authority -**The TRVA is the governing body for the River Vision Project and acts as the liaison for the participating project partners.

**United States Army Corps of Engineers -** The Corps develops the nation's water resources, manages and enhances environmental ecosystems, builds and sustains specific civil infrastructure and is fulfilling these responsibilities in the

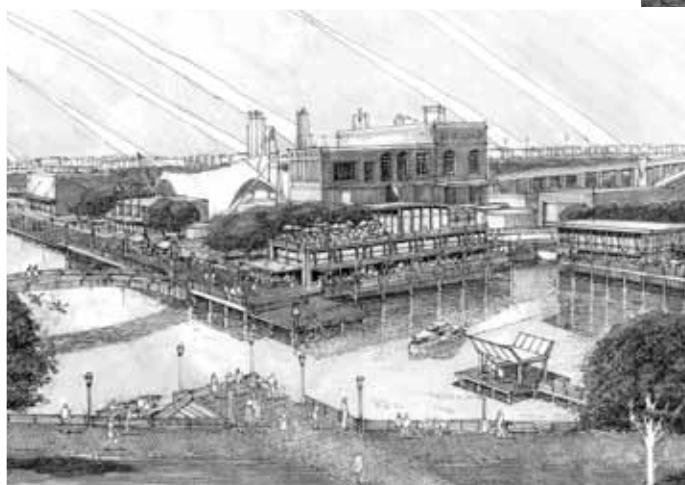
Panther Island project. Panther Island is being used by the Corps as the "next generation" example of urban flood risk management solutions.

**Streams and Valleys -** Streams and Valleys, Inc., is a non-profit advocate for the Trinity River. Streams and Valleys was instrumental in the Trinity River Vision master planning effort, ensuring that people from all neighborhoods and various user groups were involved in the process. They are likewise instrumental in planning for Panther Island to assure that parks, greenways, and river paths are accessible to all of Fort Worth.

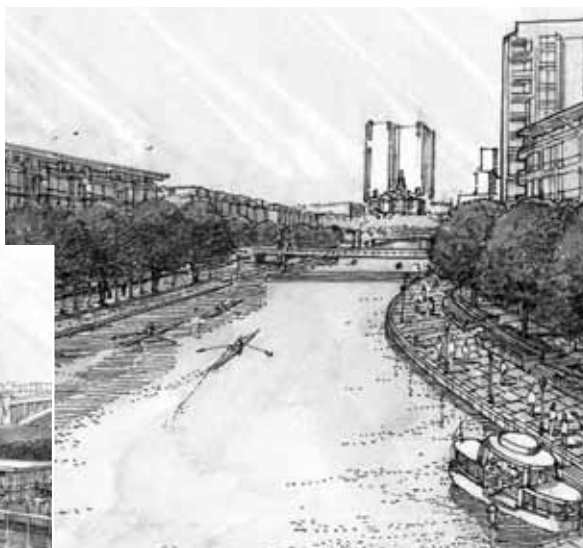
**City of Fort Worth -** In addition to the creation of the urban design guidelines that will ensure the form of the Panther Island development, the city of Fort Worth is addressing environmental and other regulatory issues. It has established a sizable Tax Increment Finance District designed to fund 27 percent of the project infrastructure cost. The city has also created an economic development fund to assist in the retention of businesses relocated to make way for public improvements.

**Tarrant County -** Tarrant County has pledged 3 percent of the total project cost and plays a facilitating role in infrastructure development.

A unique aspect of the TRVA is its management structure. Even though the TRV project has local, state, and federal agencies participating, a vertical management approach was established to guarantee a singular master schedule and budget to which all participating agencies must follow. This vertical approach has kept the project on budget and on schedule despite the inherent complications associated with numerous governmental participants.



*A 33-acre town lake with surrounding boardwalk will provide a civic focal point on the water's edge.*



*Creative design and boat turnarounds allow for ferry boat traffic between the Stockyards, Downtown, and the Cultural District.*

ment approach was established to guarantee a singular master schedule and budget to which all participating agencies must follow. This vertical approach has kept the project on budget and on schedule despite the inherent complications associated with numerous governmental participants.

A key component of the vertical management structure is the TRVA Board of Directors, which is comprised of top officials and administrators from each local partner. The TRVA Board of Directors accomplishes business through a democratic process. The monthly board meetings also help with project transparency as financials are discussed and approved at each meeting.

### **PANTHER ISLAND: A GROWING INTEREST**

Even before the infrastructure is in place, there is energy and excitement growing in Panther Island. TRVA has already begun programming the public spaces to foster a sense of place and community connection to the area in the interim.

TRVA coordinates events such as the "Rockin' the River," an annual summer tubing and music series that brought 13,000 people down to the banks of the Trinity River last summer. Not only did it help bring name recognition to the new district, but it also helped combat negative connotations associated with the water quality

of the Trinity River. Rockin' the River has won awards from the Texas Recreation and Parks Society for Promotional and Marketing Excellence as well as Excellence in Programming a Special Event.

TRVA also programs an annual 4th of July celebration that takes place in Panther Island with free music, family activities, and the largest fireworks show in North Texas. In 2013, over 70,000 people attended the event along the Trinity River. Up from several thousand attendees just three years earlier, Fort Worth's Fourth is a great example of the community's shift in perception of the Trinity River and their willingness to embrace it for the wonderful asset it is.

Programmed and managed by TRVA, these events have sparked an increased interest from third parties who now want to hold festivals, concerts, 5K races, and more on the banks of the Trinity River. What was a vacant public space only several years ago is now home to privately produced events such as Fort Worth Music Festival, Untapped Fest, Dia de los Toadies, Solar Fest, and more. All of these events strengthen community connection to the river and the Panther Island neighborhood.

### **PANTHER ISLAND: THE EARLY ADOPTERS**

While major infrastructure construction is just beginning with three new bridges, there is already a heightened interest in Panther Island, and several new additions have already been inspired because of the Trinity River Master Plan.

## TIMELINE

- 1922** The Trinity River flooded over 3,000 acres, killing 37 people and destroying many more businesses and homes. The existing levees, which were constructed after the 1908 flood, did not prevent damage, so they were increased in height following this event.
- 1949** North Central Texas was inundated with torrents of rain in the upper Trinity River basin. In spite of the levees in place after the 1922 flood, whole sections of neighborhoods surrounding downtown were beneath 10 feet of water. Thousands were left homeless, 10 people died, and property damages reached \$15 million.
- 1949** United States Army Corps of Engineers opened a Fort Worth office and began building a flood protection system on the Trinity River that included the present levee system.
- 1957** Federally funded improvements were completed, including the construction and strengthening of the levees. The plan also straightened the Clear Fork and West Fork channels of the river, which removed the natural meander of the river in favor of a channel system. Thousands of trees along the banks were bulldozed, and levees became barriers that kept people away from the river.
- 1969** As a result of the levee project, the Trinity River was left a dry, littered ditch for most of the 50s, 60s, and early 70s, but one that served as a level of flood defense designed to protect the 1960s population.
- 1971** A group of local citizens formalized as Streams and Valleys, an organization charged with the beautification and recreational development of the Trinity River and its tributaries. Their earliest efforts included constructing low water dams to return water to the dry beds.
- 1971** Streams and Valleys commissioned Halprin and Associates to study the Trinity River in Fort Worth. The resulting "Halprin Plan" recommended low-level dams to regulate water level, extensive multi-user trail systems, lighting, planting thousands of trees, and vastly improving public areas.
- 1988** EDAW, a noted urban planning firm from Alexandria, Virginia, was commissioned to develop a new plan that focused on expanding public access to the river.
- 2002** The Trinity River Master Plan was designed to provide flood protection, recreation, scenic beauty, and accessibility to the public. It also is a prevention plan – unlike preceding plans which were drawn up in response to disasters, this plan is designed to avert foreseeable damage and destruction and provide continuing safety.
- 2006** The TRVA was formed to manage and coordinate the project based on local partnerships with the city of Fort Worth, Tarrant County, Streams and Valleys, and the Tarrant Regional Water District, working closely with the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the Texas Department of Transportation.
- 2014** The first year for substantial above-ground development. First, bridge construction will break ground late summer for the three new bridges necessary for the project. Additionally, two private developments exceeding a total of \$60 million will begin in 2014. They are expected to bring several hundred housing units to the district and will be the first residential developments to exist on Panther Island.



*Rockin' the River has quickly become a Fort Worth summer staple. The free Thursday night tubing and live music series not only brings people next to the river but thousands are jumping in and floating up to front row seats, enjoying the only waterfront stage in Texas.*

### Panther Island Pavilion

As previously mentioned, TRVA and others program events along the river and these events are hosted at Panther Island Pavilion. Panther Island Pavilion is a scenic outdoor venue located directly north of downtown Fort Worth on the Trinity River. It boasts the only waterfront stage in Texas as well as a main stage for year-round events, two additional band shells, and an indoor venue for multi-act festivals. There is also a sand beach that provides public access to the river for boating, tubing, fishing, and swimming. A kayak and stand up paddleboard concessionaire is also located on-site for watersport rentals.

### Coyote Drive-In

Opened in the spring of 2013, Coyote Drive-In is Fort Worth's first and only modern, urban drive-in movie theatre. A beloved favorite of times past, the drive-in offers its visitors a new twist on an old tradition. Equipped with three screens, Coyote Drive-In plays first-run movies in digital format.

In addition to the car drive-in, the area can accommodate theater-goers without cars as well, thanks to a pavilion complete with fans, misters, and an upgraded concession stand called the Coyote Canteen. Each screen has room for 250 to 500 cars. One screen faces north, meaning patrons can watch the movie with the Fort Worth skyline in the background.

### Tarrant County College

Tarrant County College (TCC) has not one but two riverfront campuses in the Panther Island district. In 2009, RadioShack had extra space in their headquarters, and TCC jumped at the chance to have a presence in central Fort Worth. This public-private partnership lead TCC to purchase the 900,000-square-foot campus for \$238 million. TCC then invested another \$80 million in renovations, which created a beautiful, state-of-the-art educational facility.



The Trinity River East Campus was designed by the world renowned Bing Thom Architects (BTA), and it was the first new building within the Panther Island district to fully embrace the Trinity River. The 150,000-square-foot, \$139 million East Campus was completed in 2011 and has won numerous awards and accolades for its stunning architecture. One of BTA's primary goals was to link downtown to its forgotten waterfront and Panther Island.

Combined, the two campuses can service over 10,000 students a year.

### **Trinity Bluff Development**

Just east of Panther Island on top of the bluff sits a new development that has blossomed in recent years. The Trinity Bluff Development has close to 1,000 condos and apartments built or under construction, along with a hotel, all within the 30-acre district. The public's response to Trinity Bluff's scenic location overlooking the river and Panther Island has been overwhelming and development shows no signs of slowing.

### **Pier One/Chesapeake Gas**

Less than a mile southwest of Panther Island, located next to the Trinity River sits the beautiful Chesapeake Gas/Pier One Corporate Riverfront Campus. This \$104 million, 440,000-square-foot, 20-story building holds a combined total of 400 jobs with an annual payroll of over \$20 million. Site selection managers for this building cite the future Panther Island development and the close proximity to the river as driving factors in their location decision.

### **LaGrave Field**

Located in the heart of Panther Island sits LaGrave Field – a minor league baseball stadium that is home to the Fort Worth Cats. LaGrave Field is a historic icon in Fort Worth and brings thousands of visitors annually to games, concerts, and events. It will remain a staple in Panther Island as the district continues to evolve.

### **Panther Island Brewing**

The latest addition to Panther Island is Panther Island Brewing. Opened in the spring of 2014, this craft brewery recognized the future of Panther Island and became an early-adopter in the development process. Located just off the Trinity Trails, Panther Island Brewing encourages visitors coming for tours and tastings to take the scenic route and bike or walk to the brewery.

And finally, we are eager to announce the first projects going vertical in Panther Island! Two private developments exceeding a total of \$60 million will begin in 2014. They are expected to bring several hundred housing units to the district and will be the first residential developments to exist on Panther Island.

## **GATEWAY PARK: PRESERVING NATURE, IMPROVING RECREATION**

The revitalization of Gateway Park is another exciting component of the central city portion of the Trinity River Vision. Located just five miles outside of downtown Fort Worth, Gateway Park is an underutilized resource that was added to the project in 2008 to help with downstream flood risk management. Its inclusion in the scope means that federal funds can be allocated for the park's revival.

In its current state, Gateway Park is comprised of gravel pits, an old landfill, an old sewage treatment plant, outdated soccer fields, and Fort Woof (Fort Worth's favorite dog park). Thanks to the TRV, the park will receive a major restoration of its ecosystem, add numerous and diverse recreational amenities, and provide the necessary flood storage to ensure the viability of the central city flood risk management project.

At just over 1,000 acres, Gateway Park will become the largest urban-programmed park in the area. Park-goers can expect the new and improved Gateway to be completely equipped with first class recreational amenities, making the park a regional destination for outdoor activities.



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New additions will include soccer fields, baseball and softball fields, disc golf, mountain bike courses, covered basketball courts, 15 miles of new trails, a splash park, a dog park expansion, an outdoor amphitheater, rowing center, an in-ground skate park, and new entry towers. These additions are a direct result of community input gathered during a series of public meetings held throughout the master planning process.

The improvements to Gateway Park are likely to spur positive economic development around the park. The project also meets the needs of the community by connecting the east and southeast neighborhoods of Fort Worth to the Trinity River.

### CONNECTING THE CITY: THE TRV EXPERIENCE

The third component to the Trinity River Vision Master Plan is The TRV Experience. It is a 10-year capital improvement plan to embrace the opportunity to make the Trinity River and Trinity Trails the strong backbone for the evolving neighborhoods in Fort Worth. The plan includes over 90 projects throughout the 88 miles of Trinity River and tributaries in Fort Worth. The plan addresses the public's desires for enhancements such as improved neighborhood and park linkages, better signage, more recreational amenities, new sections of trails, and changes in trail design.



*The Trinity Trails are currently comprised of over 70 miles of hike and bike trails, 23 Trailheads, and six kayak and canoe launches.*

Having a river that runs through each quadrant of the city provides a unique opportunity for Fort Worth. Not only can the river serve a recreational function for exercisers and nature lovers, it can be an important linkage among the many neighborhoods throughout Fort Worth. Whether a person lives to the north, south, east, west or downtown, the Trinity River provides a common denominator for citizens from all across the city.

### A HOME FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Dig deep with any player involved in the project and you will find a core value that resonates through each of them: the desire to create a brighter future for their city and establish a community where their children and grandchildren can grow, learn, live, and play.

When the dust has settled and this massive undertaking is complete, Fort Worth will be left with a legacy that will stand the test of time for generations to come. The city can hold its head high and proudly acknowledge that it took a risk for the sake of its future. 🌐

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