



Melissa Phillip photos / Houston Chronicle

ky Zitterich and her dog, Spencer, enjoy a recent walk through Lake Creek Preserve, a hidden gem in Montgomery County.

A walk on the wilderness side



A numbered post marks Palmetto palms, just one of the types of flora that flourish in the Lake Creek Preserve.

Group attempting to protect 10,000 acres of bottomland north of The Woodlands

By Mihir Zaveri

A dirt trail winds across a patch of forest just north of The Woodlands, running between Overcup oak and loblolly pine trees, huge green Palmettos and groves of native bamboo.

Many area residents won't recognize the trail or the place. There's no sign yet on the busy road to the west signaling the existence of this preserve in the rich bottomlands of Lake Creek, a meandering tributary of the San Jacinto River.

In recent months, volunteers have installed short boardwalks on some of the trail's soggy patches, but other segments remain submerged in rainwater.

While work on the Montgomery County Lake Creek Preserve is just beginning, it's only a small portion of the real project underway, an ambitious attempt to protect more than 10,000 acres along some 20 miles of the creek's sinuous waters, mirroring the celebrated Spring and Cypress Creek

Greenway continues on B10

Greenway will depend on owners of land

Lake Creek Preserve

The Montgomery County Lake Creek Preserve is located north of The Woodlands and south of the Woodforest development.



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greenways to the south. Doing so will mean not only soliciting thousands of dollars in donations, but convincing the owners of the land around the creek that the wilderness is worth preserving.

Organizers hope that if they can get people to come to this small slice of the creek's bottomlands and experience the natural surroundings, it might build momentum for securing a larger greenbelt.

"The objective is to get people down here to see what's here," said Glenn

Big Thicket ecosystem with the Piney Woods, as well as some Post Oak Savannah from the west. An area filled with brush will suddenly open up into a small meadow with tall trees. At several points, the trail skirts the sandy banks of Lake Creek.

Migratory pathway

The bottomlands along the creek are a critical migration link for wildlife, allowing them to move from

projects in the Houston region.

Preserving the wilderness around areas like Lake, Spring and Cypress creeks is "critical" for flood control and keeping pollutants — garbage, human waste, herbicides and other chemicals — out of the waterway and from eventually flowing down to the San Jacinto River and into Lake Houston, threatening the drinking water supply, she said.

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But with the rapid development that's engulfing this part of Montgomery County, and the pollution and habitat destruction that almost inevitably comes with it, an increasing number of people are beginning to worry about the creek's prospects.

January-Bevers said that while Spring and Cypress creeks had drawn attention for years from

ing those parties that they need to preserve their land and not develop, build or clear-cut it will be a challenge.

January-Bevers said the best way to accomplish this is by educating the public about the bottomlands and the tangible benefits they provide, such as flood control, recreation and water filtering.

Plans for nature center

Buckley said a more

the greenway's importance to the region. Organizers will take an inventory of who owns the rest of the land along the creek, gauging their willingness to sell or preserve land.

He said he and other organizers have started a nonprofit organization that's seeking 501(c)(3) status, so they can raise money to buy land.

For the county, a protected greenway along Lake Creek would be a



Becky Zitterich and her dog, Spencer, follow one of the sections of boardwalk installed by volunteers to raise the path over soggy portions in the Lake Creek Preserve in Montgomery County.

Melissa Phillip /
Houston Chronicle



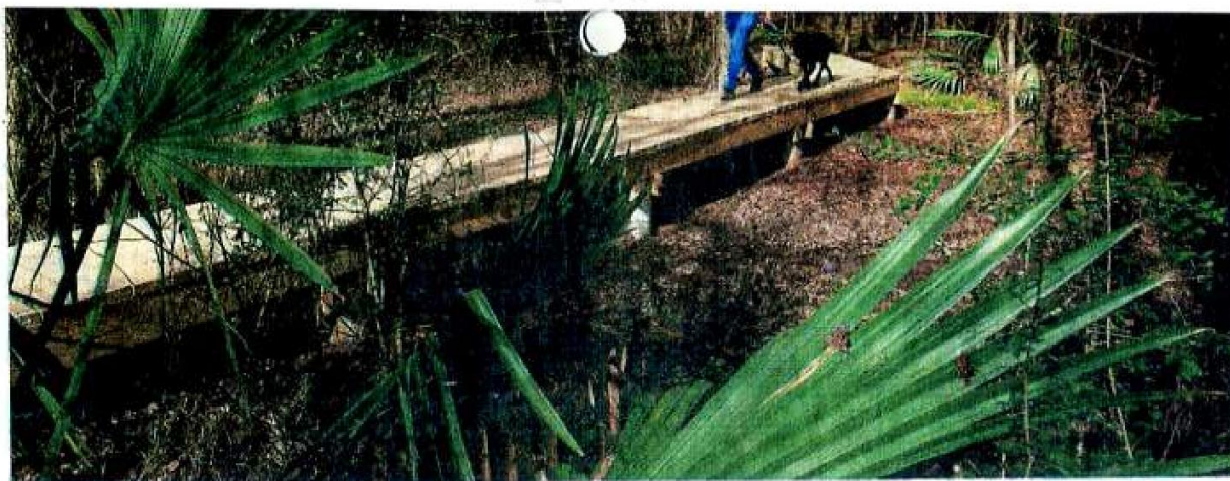
Greenway from page B1

greenways to the south. Doing so will mean not only soliciting thousands of dollars in donations, but convincing the owners of the land around the creek that the wilderness is worth preserving.

Organizers hope that if they can get people to come to this small slice of the creek's bottomlands and experience the natural surroundings, it might build momentum for securing a larger greenbelt.

"The objective is to get people down here to see what's here," said Glenn Buckley, a project organizer.

This first trail runs through about 64 acres of wilderness, part of a larger 529-acre piece of preserved land that came under Montgomery County's control after years of legal wrangling between a now-bankrupt developer and some of the first people to move to the area when it was a new development, Buckley said. The area mixes the densely wooded



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Migratory pathway

The bottomlands along the creek are a critical migration link for wildlife, allowing them to move from Grimes County all the way to the San Jacinto River. While not easily seen, bobcats and coyote prowl through the shrubs, deer graze and the occasional alligator swims in the creek's brownish water.

There are more tangible benefits, too, according to Deborah January-Bevers, the president and CEO of Houston Wilderness, a nonprofit organization that studies and helps coordinate conservation

projects in the Houston region.

Preserving the wilderness around areas like Lake, Spring and Cypress creeks is "critical" for flood control and keeping pollutants — garbage, human waste, herbicides and other chemicals — out of the waterway and from eventually flowing down to the San Jacinto River and into Lake Houston, threatening the drinking water supply, she said.

Wilderness also means recreational opportunities for existing and future homeowners, said Virgil Yoakum, a vice president of Johnson Development Corp., which owns the Woodforest development to the north of the preserve that is expected to feature its formal entrance.

"We think strengthening, maintaining an asset of that nature — an ecosystem of that nature — adds tremendous value to an

overall community," said Yoakum.

But with the rapid development that's engulfing this part of Montgomery County, and the pollution and habitat destruction that almost inevitably comes with it, an increasing number of people are beginning to worry about the creek's prospects.

January-Bevers said that while Spring and Cypress creeks had drawn attention for years from Harris and Montgomery counties, as well as from environmental groups, Lake Creek is only now getting the same scrutiny.

"Really within the span of two years, if not even less than that, it has kind of skyrocketed to being a top priority," she said.

Most of the creek's bottomlands are still unprotected, some of them crossing into land held by families or developers or other companies. Convinc-

ing those parties that they need to preserve their land and not develop, build or clear-cut it will be a challenge.

January-Bevers said the best way to accomplish this is by educating the public about the bottomlands and the tangible benefits they provide, such as flood control, recreation and water filtering.

Plans for nature center

Buckley said a more formal "grand opening" is planned later this year for the 64-acre parcel, hopefully bringing more people to the trails. In part of the larger 539-acre area, organizers are in the early stages of planning a nature center that can serve as an educational hub for local schoolchildren.

Buckley said he's also starting to reach out to community and business groups, such as the Rotary Club, to convince people of

the greenway's importance to the region. Organizers will take an inventory of who owns the rest of the land along the creek, gauging their willingness to sell or preserve land.

He said he and other organizers have started a nonprofit organization that's seeking 501(c)3 status, so they can raise money to buy land.

For the county, a protected greenway along Lake Creek would be a major benefit, said County Judge Craig Doyal, one that he said would be a real possibility with the right amount of effort.

Doyal said developers could be offered incentives to protect the land as mitigation for development projects elsewhere.

"We always should be mindful of preserving that natural beauty everywhere that we can," he said.

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