360°—Widening the Partnership Circle

The bigger the party, the lower the cost, the broader the support

By Kevin Shanley, FASLA, & Patricia Knudson Joiner, AICP

An emerging approach to the classic public-private partnership (PPP) is a new model for getting projects designed, funded, approved and built. Rather than pursue water needs only in conjunction with mutual agencies or other well-trodden ties, innovative water planners and engineers are widening the partnership circle to consider every conceivable constituent to a proposed project, whether public or private, nonprofit or for-profit, locally or nationally focused.

These 360-degree PPPs are different because they take a wide, holistic approach to a community's resources, with the goal of leveraging every square foot of space and every dollar for dual, triple, quadruple and more uses.

Any group with a need or objective, if brought to the table early enough, can be seen as a partial funding source that stretches dollars to new heights. And it is not just for the money: Partnerships can turn adversaries into supporters.

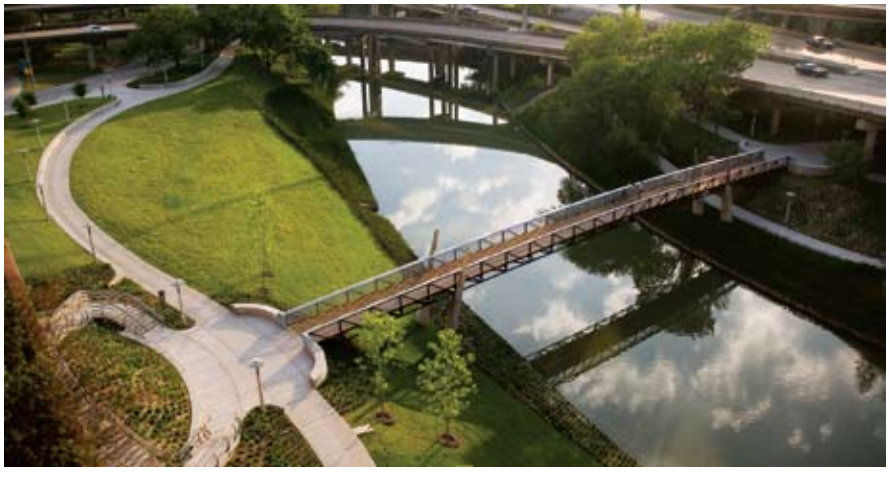
A Dramatic Opportunity for Innovative Collaboration

A 360-degree, open-eyed analysis of a property's or a creek's adjacencies can reveal many potential partners. On the public side, they could include transit agencies, schools, parking authorities, parks departments, power agencies, port authorities and quasi-government entities such as utility districts or tax-increment reinvestment zones. The private sector possibilities are endless: housing developers and their resultant homeowners associations; commercial real estate office, retail and industrial properties; resorts and golf courses; apartment buildings; civic groups; land-preservation trusts; and even duck hunters committed to creating bird habitat.

A multiuse approach to water treatment is limited only by the partners' creativity. Their openness can bring creative solutions to the fore, including the following:

- Water-polishing wetlands that double as green parks, hiking areas and animal habitat, enhancing nearby communities;
- Water conveyance systems—once automatically designed as underground pipes, concrete-lined canals and tunnels—developed as streambeds that create flourishing creeks and ecosystems for public enjoyment; and
- Water detention systems or creeks that "carve into" or share space with parks, utility infrastructure corridors, roadways, athletic fields, etc.

In fact, the current funding environment in the U.S. is unfolding as a dramatic opportunity for innovative collaboration on a new scale. Water



This intensely urban, formerly trash-ridden section of Buffalo Bayou has been transformed into an attractive, storm water-friendly park.

departments and agencies are, in many respects, in a golden age that welcomes innovation even as new funding flows from federal and other sources.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency practically has mandated innovation for one-fifth of the stimulus spending on water projects. Of the $6 billion of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 funds aimed for clean water and drinking water capitalization grants through Sept. 30, 2010, the agency said in a policy letter: "To the extent there are sufficient eligible project applications, not less than 20% of the funds shall be for projects, or portions of projects, that include green infrastructure, water or energy-efficiency improvements or other environmentally innovative activities."

The ARRA is in full swing, with allocations ranging from California's $280 million to $19 million each for Delaware, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming.

Other stimulus funds are being allocated with an eye toward joint venture and innovation, such as the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) $1.5 billion in allocations. DOT spending is not just for highways, but also is aimed at streetcars, pedestrian/bicycle paths, multimodal transit centers and transformation of automobile-oriented arterials into "complete streets" with green components—opportunities for multiuse partnering with other public-private needs, including water agencies.

Promenade Partnership

A five-year-old street section of the Buffalo Bayou Promenade in Houston is a model 360-degree PPP. It involved nearly two dozen constituents in planning and execution, and today it provides benefits to an equally diverse set of users. From a water agency perspective, the promenade project has improved water quality while better accommodating storms with minimal impact.

For most of the year the formerly trash-strewn waterway under an interstate freeway serves as a major urban park with public amenities, including acres of grassy open space, a public amphitheater, walking/running paths, boating, a skateboard park and a photogenic gateway seen as a jewel of downtown Houston's resurgence.

Adjacent neighborhoods that for decades had turned their backs to Buffalo Bayou now are clearing away view corridors, adding entry points to access the park and enjoying property value enhancements. As planners pointed out at the inception of New York City's Central Park, property values around such amenities often become the highest in the city, benefiting city coffers and offsetting the original expenditures.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the promenade project was the leveraging of public and private

Fair of the Future

Check out this article's Web-exclusive sidebar at www.estormwater.com/lm.cfm/st061003 to read about a visionary fairgrounds overhaul in California. Project partners included a county, city, fair board, regional transportation and water agencies, private developers, adjacent homeowners and a neighboring amusement park.

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funds across several entities. Among the list are local agencies such as the Harris County Flood Control District and the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department; nonprofits such as the Buffalo Bayou Partnership; local philanthropic foundations; corporations; and high-level agencies such as the Texas Department of Transportation and Port of Houston.

Additional phases of the Buffalo Bayou Master Plan, which covers 10 sq miles, are underway.

From Impaired Ecosystem to Invaluable Development

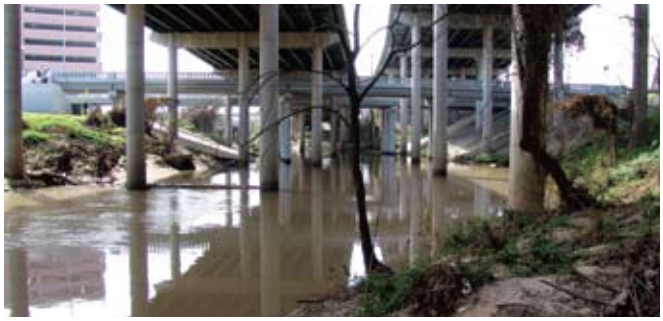
Another model 360-degree PPP can be seen in a major 3,500-acre housing development in southern Texas called Shadow Creek. Developers recognized its growing area had significant challenges, including a denuded, damaged ecosystem and an outdated water treatment capacity.

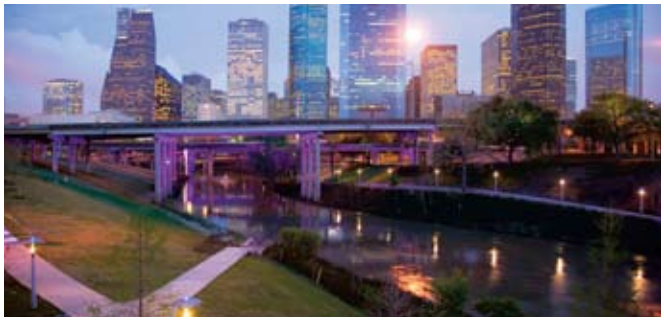
Pearland, Texas, the local municipality, created a tax-increment reinvestment zone that relieved near-term tax obligations for the developer while also holding the firm to delivering value from its development plan. The developer advanced all of the funds needed to build the master-planned community. The city of Pearland offered a developer reimbursement agreement for $200 million of the development costs. Under the performance-based reimbursement agreement, the developer was reimbursed only after the new incremental values were realized.

Since project inception in 1999, more than 4,500 new homes, parks, schools, hospitals and a major lifestyle retail/office development have been created. Today, this maturing new community has an estimated aggregate property value in excess of $2 billion.

The new community created shared amenities and services that go beyond its boundaries. More than half of the land—some 1,750 acres—is a combination of lakes, park space, creeks, animal habitat and open space. Residents buying into Shadow Creek also buy into the community's environmental and sustainability attributes, instilling a fundamental education to young and old that new development can complement and balance with the natural environment.

Another contribution of this PPP was the design of a chain of lakes





Top: *Buffalo Bayou before its revamp project.* Bottom: *The site today.*

within the development that pull water from Clear Creek, providing water quality benefits and reduced downstream flooding to the east. This public-to-public partnership was made possible thorough cooperation between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Harris County Flood Control, Harris County and the city of Pearland.

Far-Reaching Benefits

These 360-degree PPPs are growing as public agencies, planners and elected officials see the significant benefits of broader, coordinated, high-impact planning. As officials involved with such innovative programs can attest, a completed project that enjoys wide support not only as a water project but as a park, playfield, wetland habitat or neighborhood amenity is a win-win public-private venture with long-term benefits beyond its original scope. SWS

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