

Developers pay up in Pearland

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In 1997, Pearland, Texas, implemented a program encouraging developers to purchase acre-feet in city-owned retention basins as compensation for increased water runoff caused by new construction. Twenty months later, nine developers have made such purchases, and the resulting revenue (nearly \$30,000) has been used to offset costs of retention-related capital projects.

Pearland, located south of Houston, may seem an unlikely place for flooding. But, since the early part of this decade, seasonal rains have regularly forced area creeks over their banks and into streets, homes and businesses. In October 1994, when record rainfall flooded more than 100 homes, Pearland's city council implemented a master drainage plan and coordinated it with a similar county plan.

City Manager Paul Grohman spearheaded the city's flood control efforts, which included a \$2 million investment in land acquisitions, adding 613 acres for stormwater retention. (Six regional basins were planned; one is open, and three are being excavated this year.) At the same time, Senior Engineer John Hargrove drafted the retention purchasing program for developers.

As part of the program, developers are asked to mitigate flood hazards created by "construction on land that creates new surface disturbances that result from filling, excavating or surfacing activities on the land." To do so, developers purchase 0.2-0.6 acre-feet of retention space for every 1 acre of development. The actual amount of space purchased depends upon the shape of the development; the amount of grading, filling and paving required; and the hydrologic condition of the site before development.

Prior to implementing the program, the city directed builders working in special flood hazard areas to provide stormwater retention - usually in the form of on-site holding ponds. However, with the implementation of its new plan, the city extended the retention requirements to all builders, anywhere within the city limits. Since then, developers have begun purchasing space in city retention facilities because doing so is less costly than building retention ponds.

Pearland is excavating the detention basins, which range in size from 30 acre-feet to 100 acre-feet, from the acreage it purchased as part of its master drainage plan. The excavating contractor is selling the dirt to local builders, meaning that the jobs pay for themselves and cost the taxpayers nothing.

Land acquisition and basin engineering costs have been paid with certificates of obligation and annual operating funds. The retention fees and revenue generated by land use (e.g., one site will accommodate multistory office buildings; others will accommodate parks) will help the city recover some of those costs.