

# Carothers Coastal Gardens: A Proposal for the Future

*January 7th, 6 pm*

*Carothers Coastal Gardens Task Force*

*Chair: David Popken*

*Members: Amanda Daly, Nancy Edmonson, George Kyame, Rowena McDermid  
and Council liaisons Laura Davis and Buddy Hammann*

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## **Acknowledgments**

Our gratitude goes to everyone who has worked to help the Carothers Coastal Gardens Task Force to develop recommendations that deliver both strength and depth.

On property values, we are grateful to local realtor Norman Edmonson for consulting with us and providing valuations. For plant and pollinator expertise we are fortunate that Task Force members include Rowena McDermid of the Native Plant Society of Texas, Amanda Daly of the Houston Zoo and Prairie Pollinator Pathway Project in Harris County, and George Kyame, president of the Galveston Bay Chapter of the Master Naturalists and thanks to Nancy Edmonson, Seabrook resident and former Mayor of Shoreacres for her time and expertise.

Houston Urban Biologist Jaime Gonzalez outlined for us the regional initiatives reflecting the growing movement to restore natural vegetation, and the steps needed to achieve this. During 2019 both national and statewide conferences on the topic occurred at UH Clear Lake and South Shore Harbor, with several Task Force members presenting and attending sessions.

For history, ideas, data, and administrative support, we appreciate City Manager Gayle Cook, Public Works Director Kevin Padgett, their staff and members of the Open Space and Trails Committee, chaired by Helen Burton. Finally, our thanks go to Mayor Thom Kolupski and the Seabook City Council for this opportunity to suggest possible paths forward for the park property at Carothers Coastal Gardens

## Appendix: Proposed Costs

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### Phase 1 Proposed FY Budget Carothers Coastal Gardens

- Reduced mowing = \$12,000 (\$1,000/mo)
- Staff Time on Rentals = \$10,400 (\$200/wk)
- Fixed Costs = \$32,500
- Administrative-Grants, Etc = \$12,000
- **FY Budget Totals = \$66,900**
- Focus on trail use, signage needed = \$500
- Connector trails. 2 @ \$2800 = \$5,600
- Native seed purchases = \$400
- **Proposed FY Budget Totals: = \$73,400**

## Selling a Portion of Carothers

Based upon discussions with City Staff and comments at the very first Carothers Coastal Gardens Workshop earlier this year, the Task Force was asked to investigate options for selling a portion of this park as a means to reduce or eliminate operational and maintenance expenses. The Task Force explored three possible sales scenarios. They are listed here.

The TF approached Norman Edmonson of Edmonson and Associates to give insight on projected revenues from the sale of certain assets at the park. Bear in mind that these figures are somewhat speculative due to the fact that Mr Edmonson could not find any comparable properties in order to arrive at a more market based pricing model. These values represent his considered opinion and nothing more and would naturally be subject to all fees and commissions customarily related to any real estate sale.

Sale of the House and Casita and more than 1 acre:	\$875,000
Sale of the Casita only and less than 1 acre:	\$250,000
Sale of raw land west of the access road, less than 1 acre:	\$125,000

## Executive Summary

In establishing this Task Force, City Council charged us with three main tasks:

- to evaluate the best future uses for Carothers Coastal Gardens,
- to suggest how to make it more accessible to more park users, and
- to estimate likely O&M costs for our proposals.

The disproportionate amount of Staff time spent on CCG to the detriment of our other parks is the main reason this park has been under scrutiny and discussion. The Carothers Coastal Gardens Task Force is very conscious that as a small city, Seabrook faces significant constraints in parks funding and in volunteer resources. We have therefore focused on developing *realistic* proposals that take these limitations into account. Recommendations are divided into two phases: sooner and later. Sooner means now, as soon as practicably possible. Later means within the next 10 years. We urge that our recommendations in the "later" section be included in the revised Parks Master Plan.

Regarding the now, how do we get the most impact for the least cost? The Task Force believes the answer is to focus on expansion into Carothers Coastal Gardens of one of our greatest assets, our trails system. Presently, despite their inclusion in the original 2007 Carothers Master Plan, there are no delineated trails in this park. We feel that this is the number one reason it has been overlooked and underused by our citizens.

### Phase 1 Recommendations: Immediate Future

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For the immediate future the objective is to reduce operational costs at the park, something that has already occurred to a large degree, when the City stopped marketing Carothers Coastal Gardens (CCG) as a wedding venue. This greatly reduces the large expenses related to that effort. The second issue is one of inclusion, making CCG a viable part of our parks system as opposed to something seemingly off-limits or little known. Expanding the trail system into CCG offers the best solution. Finally, we feel that the City should treat the facility at CCG just like the Community House, with the same or similar fee structures, rules and regulations. The marketing effort should be in line with the Community House marketing, no more, no less. By lowering the bar, in essence we are expanding public accessibility, one of the key goals to come out of this TF. This should by no means be the ultimate goal, but should be considered a reasonable solution while other more ambitious plans are pursued.

## **A. Limit Mowing**

- ◆ Mow monthly. Occasional extra manicuring as necessary. Formal beds and plantings maintained by volunteers (current scenario)
- ◆ Create low cost pathways by mowing and maintaining paths through the proposed re-wilding area.
- ◆ Introduce "re-wilding" by mowing most of the open land only twice a year (a model for this no or low-mow regime is already in use for the low wet swales in Meador Park, (see photo)
- ◆ These actions alone greatly reduce Staff time and thus expenses

## **B. Emphasize Trail Use**

- ◆ Use new signage to encourage Pine Gully Park trails users to incorporate CCG in their walks
- ◆ Add dedicated paths for CCG pedestrian access, at the eastern edge of the existing parking lot and near the bay (see photos)



*Proposed new trail shown by two yellow lines*



*Develop trail signage directing people to the bay and back:*

- ◆ Direct them from the Pine Gully trailhead to the new CCG entrance trailhead
- ◆ Direct them along the paved fountain footpath and around the house towards the bay
- ◆ Direct them onto gravel road to the bay and back via grassy paths

*Mow a grassy footpath back from the bay (later to become a fully developed trail)*

- ◆ Mow curving grassy footpath returning from bay to patio
- ◆ Trail users will thus have a roundtrip route to use immediately
- ◆ Add dispenser for dog poop bags near the pedestrian entry
- ◆ Consider accessible bathrooms or a portable toilet once park use grows



*The M.D. Anderson Prairie at Texas Medical Center shows how trails and prairie can interface with mowing and buildings. A similar regime can be applied to Carothers*



*Re-wilding at Meador Park*

### **C. Manage Like the Community House**

*Make rules and regulations for rentals at CCG similar to those the Community House*

While there is no pressing need for another venue to mirror the Community House and the means by which it is utilized, the Task Force feels that for the immediate future, the City should consider offering the buildings at Carothers in a fashion similar to that of the Community House, and should set rules, fees, marketing and maintenance structures accordingly. If uses of buildings at Carothers mirror Community House uses more closely, the management and staffing needs will also be similar and thus more modest. The goal here is not to generate revenue, but to continue to gain wider exposure for CCG in our community while other more ambitious solutions are pursued.

### **Costs and Further Comments, Phase 1**

The above actions either cost very little or significantly reduce expenses going forward. City Staff has previously given both Council, the TF and our citizens budgetary guidance for Carothers when it was being marketed and used as a wedding venue. That report was the

impetus for taking a closer look at CCG and how it could be better managed and utilized. Staff have also assisted the TF in assigning operational expenses for the facility as it is presently being maintained and marketed. As mentioned earlier, there has been a large reduction in overall expenses just from the cessation of all that was necessary for it to be a viable wedding venue. Also bear in mind that some of our Phase I proposals (e.g., re-wilding) will further reduce Staff time and expenses going forward.

## **Additionally**

Replace proposed mown footpaths with fully developed crushed gravel trails as budget allows and at whatever pace is feasible and practical given City staff and resources, volunteer efforts and grant funding available

Develop nature center components such as viewing decks and shoreline restoration as budget allows and at whatever pace is feasible and practical given City staff and resources, volunteer effort, and grant funding available

Continue to seek partners interested in utilizing the structures, still for public participation, but allowing for a richer mix of activities without putting any additional stress on City Staff or Budgets.

Our trail system is viable, is important, and is treasured and used by many. We know from historical user data collected with the help of HGAC that the Pine Gully Park trail is the most heavily used. It is not a giant leap to think that getting a viable trail system in place in CCG, using the cost-effective steps that we have outlined, will quickly produce more users.

### **TRAIL USE COUNTS, 2016**

Formal counts were conducted in 2016 using camera traps to record user numbers on the Seabrook trails. The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) provided equipment, monitoring and analysis. Counts occurred at points in 12 parks over a period of 18 days. The full results provide real-time user numbers for every hour of every day at every counting point.

The four trail segments showing highest daily trail use were all in the wilder northern parks, where people are out on the trails to enjoy natural views and see birds and deer. *The greatest numbers of people per day were recorded in Pine Gully Park.*

*Trail use numbers over 18 days:*

Lowest total           = 747 (18 days, Miramar Park)  
Highest total         = 3,835 (18 days, Pine Gully Park)

Average maximum	=	213 people/day (average max. across 12 parks)
Highest maximum	=	385 people/day (average max. Pine Gully at weekends)
Highest single day	=	561 (Pine Gully)

Note that the highest trail count for a *single* day (Pine Gully, 561 people in one day) is close to the total for almost three weeks at the Miramar Park (747 people in 18 days).

## Phase 2 Recommendations: Master Plan Time Horizon, Ten Years

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Longer range planning requires a more comprehensive approach: A vision for the entire park and actions that are sustainable and fit well with the upcoming master plan for all of Seabrook's parks and trails. Here we propose a rich mix of uses and partners. Please note that some components of our Phase 2 recommendations were in the original Carothers Coastal Gardens 2007 Master Plan but never came to fruition (e.g., use as nature center, trails in the wooded western section, shoreline restoration). Others are new. We do hope that all will be seriously considered as the new Master Plan takes shape.

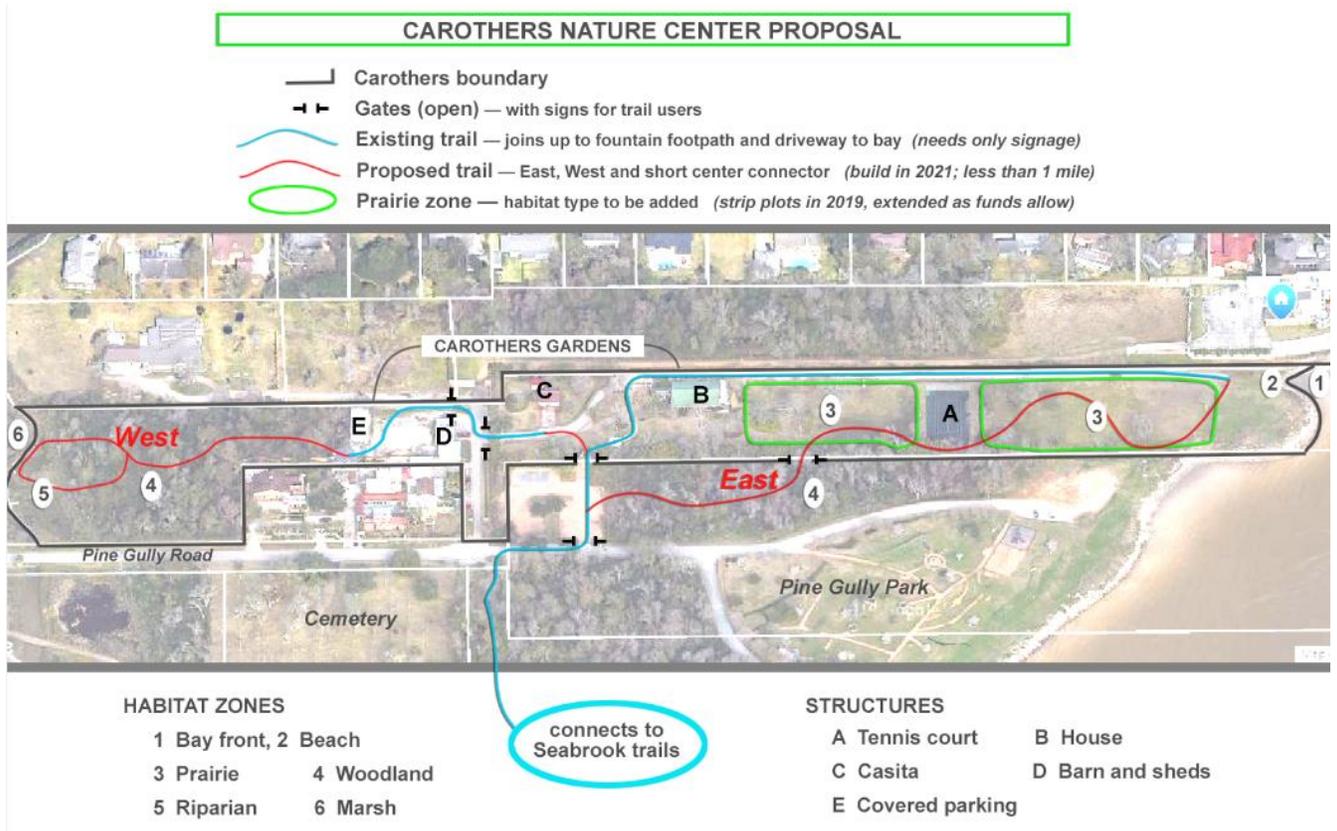
### A. Revisit Actions Proposed in Original Master Plan

- ◆ *Goals, concepts, and needs:* Goals in the original master plan included a proposed bird watching platform and tower, a walking track, and making the most of the different habitat zones. *Concepts* presented in the plan went well beyond event venue ideas, including use of the property as a nature center, and the possible creation of a shoreline boardwalk as well as a kayak launch. *Needs* expressed included pedestrian connections, directional signage, dumpster relocation, and collaborating with Master Gardeners and the Open Space and Trails Committee on horticulture.
- ◆ *The western section:* The portion of Carothers at the west end currently has overflow parking, storage shed, a covered parking structure, concrete slabs, then forest and marshland. As in the previous Master Plan, this area should be included in the proposed trail expansion; new signage needed to aid pedestrian access; drainage work and/or boardwalks added as necessary; a destination viewing platform added at the marsh's edge; unused concrete slabs removed.
- ◆ *Shoreline restoration:* This proposal fits in well with other marsh restoration projects such as the successful Pine Gully restoration. We envision removal of existing rip-rap and grading to reduce the incline at the shore's edge and with volunteer help, perhaps from the Galveston Bay Foundation, undertake a shoreline marsh restoration project, which would likely include geotube barriers on the seaward edge of the planted area for protection from wave action and deep bore sedimentation.

- ◆ *Network of new trails:* As envisioned by the original master plan, from the bay shoreline all the way to the western terminus of the park at the marsh and creek.
- ◆ *Retain most structures:* House, Casita and surrounding grounds to be left in their current state, with mostly volunteer support to maintain them, with the exception of mowing done by City staff, but only on the same schedule as the other parks.

## **B. Consider New Actions**

- ◆ *Pocket Prairie plantings or Re-wilding:* This might ultimately occupy approximately 4-5 acres, removing or re-wilding the existing St Augustine lawn from the shoreline to near the formal grounds surrounding the house, with mowed pathways around and through the area for public access and enjoyment. The concept of biodiversity is not a new one, but has gained considerably more traction in recent years as insect and bird populations are noticeably falling due to habitat loss and a warming planet. This also fits well with our pollinator pathway initiative. We envision most of this work being done by volunteers. As an adjunct, the tennis court could be utilized as a plant nursery area with an opportunity to educate citizens, especially our children, on biodiversity, seedling propagation and plant husbandry.
- ◆ *Nature Center Proposal:* This new proposal is *comprehensive* in that it encompasses the whole park, from beach and shoreline in the east to the woods and marsh at the far western end. The following plan view illustrates the six habitat zones spanning Carothers---bay, beach, prairie, woodland, creek, and marsh. Showcasing habitats is exactly what nature centers do best. The six existing structures also offer a wide range of possible activities. More on this later.



- ◆ **Partnerships:** Open Space and Trails Committee members have indicated a willingness to work to find possible partnerships made with local Master Gardeners and/or Master Naturalists to help maintain and enhance both the current plantings in the formal areas surrounding the house and casita and the native plantings envisioned for other segments of the park. Might the City be willing to lease the casita to a master gardener in exchange for a specified amount of labor per month on the grounds? Such a presence might have significant incidental benefits in terms of additional security for the facilities.

### C. Identify and Develop Best Uses for the Structures

**Guiding Principle: *The City provides the space, and partners provide everything else.***

The Carothers property includes the house, casita, tennis court, barn, and sheds. Potential partnerships should be explored for new low-cost uses of all structures. To be sustainable and

place minimum demands on City and Staff, the basis for partnerships should have the city providing the location, and partners providing whatever else is needed:

- equipment                      - leader or facilitator
- promotion                      - set up
- take down                      - cleanup

◆ *Explore new potential uses for structures—some possibilities:*

**Tennis court** - Add shade cloth and use as plant nursery area

- Dance performance or art installation space

**House** - Daytime activity by repeat users (e.g., weekly yoga). All do their own set-up and take-down

- One-day art shows, doing their own set-up and take down
- Birding presentations preceding walks and counts
- A local artist's gallery combined with seasonal arts/crafts shows
- A permanent local history exhibit

**Casita** - Small workshop or roundtable sessions

- Changing area for photographers working with models
- Caretaker residence
- Artist-in-residence

**Barn, sheds** - Equipment storage

- Scout troop meetings, monthly

**Covered parking and concrete pads** - Pet adoption events (shade)

◆ *Systematic partner searches:* We have a highly successful and inexpensive partnership in local birding events with Stennie Meadours of Houston Audubon Society. Members of the Open Space Committee took the initiative in finding and nurturing the collaboration with Ms. Meadours. To explore what other partnering options may exist for CCG, we should reach out systematically to other nature conservancy organizations, Scouts, schools, the Native Plant Society of Texas, Environmental Institute of Houston at UHCL, GBF, local arts organizations, and science and art teachers to name but a few. For budgetary reasons, this effort needs to be volunteer led, likely again from the Open Space Committee, with perhaps some support from the City communications department when appropriate.

◆ *Corporate Sponsored Volunteer Days:* Some maintenance actions, such as painting and grounds work might be appropriate for larger volunteer groups. OSTC has ongoing working relationships with some corporations in their effort to plant more trees in the City. Why could we not expand that concept to accomplish other varied tasks at Carothers?

◆ *Artist-in-residence:* A question emerging from the Open Spaces Committee is whether an artist-in-residence program might use the casita as a short-term accommodation for creative output. Application and selection processes might be conducted by the University of Houston Clear Lake. The Dobie Paisano Fellowship is a possible model, where winners occupy author J. Frank Dobie's former ranch. This concept is a unique one, but a prime example of the need to widen the circle of ideas.

- ◆ There are doubtless many more new possibilities for both the grounds and the buildings. To our knowledge, a fuller examination of possible new uses has never really occurred. Some of the reasons behind this are:
  - Focus was on the original mandate for an events center to produce offsetting revenue
  - From 2011 to 2017, unpaid uses of the main house were not authorized.
  - Fitness and art workshops were held for only one season.
  - City trailers and equipment occupied the west end until the new Public Works building opened.

***Again: The City provides the space, and partners provide everything else.***

## **Costs and Further Comments, Phase 2**

### *Selling a part of Carothers:*

The Task Force does not endorse selling any portion of Carothers Coastal Gardens. The Seabrook Open Space and Trails Committee has passed a resolution indicating that they likewise do not favor a sale. The benefit of retaining the land and structures avoids foreclosing all options for future uses.

If Council nevertheless wishes to explore the avenue of parting with some of the property, the Task Force recommends that it only consider selling all or part of the park land that lies west of the side street easement. Any other potential sale of house and grounds or casita and grounds would, in our opinion, be too disruptive of the park's own physical continuity and its proximity to Pine Gully Park. And while public participation in our deliberations has been modest, the overwhelming public response to selling any piece of the park has been decidedly negative.

Council has also been made aware of restrictions regarding the sale of part of this asset. It has been postulated that any parcel greater than one acre would need voter approval and any parcel less than one acre would not. However, for Council to consider a sale—even while staying within the law and being responsible to budgetary constraints—it might well be seen as undermining the trust inherently given by your constituency when they voted for acquisition of this property.

*Reminders on revenues:* Three reminders are in order. First, noting that voters approved a tax increase specifically for debt service on the bond created for acquisition of Carothers Coastal Gardens, the Task Force wants to place on record that any discussion of park expenses should not include the cost of debt service. Second, as the current Mayor has acknowledged, parks are not expected to pay for themselves. And third, in view of these and other recent developments, the former Council's original directive that Carothers should be financially self-

sufficient should be formally rescinded to prevent it from tainting any vision for the park's future.

In summary, with a focus on sustainability and biodiversity, a nature center approach at CCG is a notably good fit for many reasons. Some of which are:

- It was the first idea explored when the Carothers property was acquired in 2007.
- It was the first idea from the mayor when operating costs provoked a review in December 2018.
- It fits well with the popularity of trails in Seabrook's wilder northern parks.
- It fits well with the Open Space Committee's initiative to join the Pollinator Pathway Project.
- Natural conditions cost less to maintain, as in Wildlife Park and Seabrook Prairie.
- Natural conditions and gravel trails are relatively easy to restore following extreme weather events.
- Trails and native plantings are low-cost infrastructure: Once gravel trails are built, the only staff time they require is for periodic surface maintenance and mowing of edges for safety.

In short, these ideas are popular. They keep coming up. When ideas recur in this way, are desirable to many, and carry modest costs, they are more likely to prove sustainable in the long term. With the proper vision and care we can grow citizen participation, retain and enhance the appeal of the structures and gardens and at the same time continue to develop CCG as a natural outdoor destination for hiking, biking and birding, as well as numerous indoor opportunities for community engagement.