

# Big Builder

hanley wood

## The ABCs of Development

Texas developers turn local school district's fears into a master-planned community cornerstone.



**D**eveloper Jim Mabrey and school superintendent Jerry Morgan first came face to face in a meeting at the city hall in Crandall, Texas. Each man came committed to his cause, armed with a specific idea of where and how that corner of Kaufman County, nary a half-an-hour from the heart of Dallas, was going to develop.

Mabrey was focused on building Heartland, a 2,500-acre master-planned community slated for just north of town. Morgan was devoted to preserving the Crandall Independent School District's enviable reputation as more children were folded into the system. The slightest misstep could sour the introduction, making for a string of contentious encounters as the community moved along its growth curve.

Morgan remembers Mabrey being the first to speak: "Jerry," he said, "How do you see this community developing?"

And with that simple question, a partnership was forged. Morgan told Mabrey that

the district had just developed a comprehensive community plan that detailed new schools coming on line, mostly clustered east of town. Then Mabrey explained that his company, along with Hillwood Residential, intended to bring nearly 9,000 homes to the county over the course of 20 years, resulting in a population surge of roughly 35,000. Morgan says his reaction was, "Oh well, throw out my plan because that was way beyond anything we'd had in mind for development."

In the four years since that initial meeting, the two men have worked diligently side-by-side in what promises to become model for cooperation and community planning. Since his retirement in 2003, Morgan continues to participate in the project. He serves on a foundation board formed by the developers, along with his successor, Superintendent Larry Watson.



Mabrey says that the partnership was born out of necessity; developers see a successful school district as a major community selling point, and school districts need to wrap their arms around local developments. "Whether we like it or not, we're sort of *de facto* partners," Mabrey says.

But the real sticking point was in figuring out how to integrate the influx of new schoolchildren without taxing the district's resources. Historically, local governments failed to provide funding for new school buildings until current schools are overloaded, Morgan says.

"The money to build buildings is delayed [behind enrollment increases]. You have the need for a building much sooner than you get the money," Morgan says. "I didn't want the kids falling out the windows before I got the building."

Recognizing this concern and the costs associated with school construction, Mabrey and his partners at Hillwood Residential devised a plan that would seed the school district for growth. Not only were seven school sites within the community donated, but the team decided to pledge \$500,000 to each site for initial construction planning. In addition, the development partners established an education founda-

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**– Jim Mabrey, Texas Developer**

tion, to which 0.5 percent of every home sale, including resales, will be added to fund school programs and scholarships.

This commitment to the school district is further supported by the design of the community. A unique network of color-coded pedestrian trails intends to encourage walking carpools, allowing children safe passage to school and designated outdoor learning areas. – SY