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# Meet the Trinity park no one knows

The Dallas Water Commons is a 17-acre landscape and wetlands education center.



Rendering of the future Dallas Water Commons by Studio Outside. (Studio Outside / Dallas Wetlands Foundation)

By [Mark Lamster](#)

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Over the past decade, as the city’s attention has been focused on plans to build an expansive new park between the Trinity River levees, another park linked to the river has been progressing slowly but surely toward fruition. Think of the Dallas Water Commons as the nerdy little brother to its more [outgoing sibling](#). Instead of an amenity-fueled playground, it will be a 17-acre wetland park that will serve as both an urban oasis and an educational center, an open-air laboratory demonstrating how the city manages and remediates stormwater.

Designed by Dallas-based landscape architects [Studio Outside](#), the park will be set around a pair of retention ponds or “sumps” that sit outside the Trinity’s eastern levee bank in the Cedars, just south of the Longhorn Ballroom. The area is currently a terrain vague strewn with trash and other detritus washed down with stormwater runoff from downtown and the surrounding area.

The Water Commons will transform this space into a constructed wetland environment designed to naturally cleanse water arriving from the city’s storm sewers, sending it on a circuitous three-day journey through a series of filtration spaces. The cleansed water will then be pumped into the Trinity floodway. In total, the commons will filter some 650 million gallons of water annually.



Rendering of the future Dallas Water Commons by Studio Outside. (Studio Outside / Dallas Wetlands Foundation)

“Everything that goes onto the city streets eventually ends up in the water, and our consciousness around that is pretty minimal,” says Melanie Ferguson, the project’s director. “We’re basically making the invisible nature of water visible.”

The project was born out of the decades-long planning process for the larger Trinity park. The winning entry in the 2013 Connected City Design Challenge, a competition that [solicited](#) design proposals for a park between the levees, envisioned a chain of linked environments that would remediate air and water along the Trinity corridor.

That proposal, a collaboration between the Boston-based landscape architecture firm STOSS and New York’s SHOP Architects, was never adopted, but it caught the eye of Jack Matthews, the developer whose firm, Matthews Southwest, controls much of the land that will become the Water Commons as well as the area around it.

“As a naive developer, I looked at the water there and I said, why don’t we think about creating a beach? And everyone looked at me like I had three heads,” says Matthews. “I just didn’t understand exactly how the rainwater came down, took the oil and grit off the streets and ended up in the sump there.”



The park will be set around a pair of retention ponds or “sumps” that sit outside the Trinity’s eastern levee bank in the Cedars. (Nathan Hunsinger / Special Contributor)

In 2016, the North Central Texas Council of Governments put \$350,000 toward studies on the feasibility of transforming the area into a park, and in 2017 Matthews formed the nonprofit Dallas Wetlands Foundation to oversee the building of the commons in a private-public partnership with the city’s Park and Recreation Department and Dallas Water Utilities. That same year, the city put \$7.5 million in bond funding toward the project, to be matched by the Dallas Wetlands Foundation. It is slated for another \$5 million in the 2024 city bond. The total project budget is estimated at \$44 million to \$55 million.

As imagined, the Water Commons will be divided into a series of spaces of shifting water levels shaded by a dense tree canopy and woven through with meandering paths and boardwalks. There will be deep pools populated by water lily and duckweed, shallow waters with tall grasses, low areas designed for inundation in the event of flooding, and high banks with flowering perennials. Along the winding paths, information panels will identify the types of plants in the wetlands and the processes by which they act to clean the environment.



Cutaway rendering of the Dallas Water Commons by Studio Outside. (Studio Outside / Dallas Wetlands Foundation)

“It’s a science project and beautiful at the same time,” says writer David Marquis, an authority on the Trinity River’s history and an environmental consultant on the project. An existing building on Riverfront Boulevard, which will provide access to the park, will serve as an education center, the so-called Urban Water Lab.

There is something especially appealing about the park’s commitment to its own mission, the conviction that nature and natural systems are sufficient to make a successful urban landscape.

Groundbreaking is expected sometime this year, pending approvals from city agencies and the Army Corps of Engineers, which controls the Trinity floodplain. “We’ve done all the due diligence all the way along and we anticipate their allowance for the permits that are necessary to move forward,” says Ferguson.

Sarah Standifer, interim director of Dallas Water Utilities, says the city supports the Dallas Wetlands Foundation “working to deliver enhancements” to flood risk management infrastructure.



Aerial view of Dallas showing the location of the Dallas Water Commons. Courtesy Dallas Water Commons/ Studio Outside (Studio Outside / Dallas Wetlands Foundation)

The estimated completion time of the first phase of construction, which would entail the transformation of the northern pond, is 18 to 24 months. A second phase, which would complete the southern section, would take a similar time, though that work could be interrupted by the construction of [the proposed high-speed rail line](#), which would run directly to the east of the project footprint.

When complete, there will be dramatic views into the park from the Trinity levees. “You can stand at the top bank and see the Dallas skyline, but when you descend into the ponds, you feel like you’re in the middle of nowhere. So you have that connection and disconnection with the city,” says Gwendolyn Cohen, a landscape architect who worked on the project with Studio Outside.



Rendering of the Dallas Water Commons with adjacent housing development. (Studio Outside / Dallas Wetlands Foundation)

A cynic might suggest that this project is little more than a work of economic self-interest masquerading as public benefit, the case of a private developer convincing the city to chip in for an amenity that will enhance his own property values. “That would be a fair first impression,” says Matthews. “But I think when you study and look at it all, you’d say, ‘OK, maybe they’re trying to do something a little bit better here.’”





The reality is that self-interest and public good can go hand-in-hand, and in difficult economic times such public-private partnerships are essential for the creation and management of major urban amenities. With Klyde Warren Park and the network of parks created by Parks for Downtown Dallas, the city has shown how such partnerships can deliver desperately needed green spaces.

The Water Commons will make a welcome addition to those projects, a teaching landscape that helps us understand the essential but invisible processes that make city life possible — and attractive.



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