The Trinity River in downtown Fort Worth.

In 1846, when A.W. Moore first saw the Trinity River near present-day Dallas he described it as “a little narrow deep stinking affair.” For most of the next 150 years, many civic leaders believed that the economic future of the region depended upon navigation of the “deep stinking affair” from Fort Worth and Dallas southward more than 300 miles to the Gulf. Thus, the ultimate use of the river in the urban area was envisioned to be barge traffic with heavy industry along its banks.

When that dream died in 1981 because of changing federal priorities, it was replaced by unrelated requests for federal permits to reclaim portions of the Trinity floodplain for commercial and residential development. These requests led to studies by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USE) that showed that the cumulative effects of the various development scenarios would bring massive new flooding. In response, officials from 14 affected jurisdictions, working under the auspices of the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), came together in 1989 to declare their support for a cooperative, regional approach to manage the Trinity River Corridor, one that aimed to create a safe, clean, enjoyable, natural, and diverse river corridor for the benefit of all North Central Texas. And thus began the Trinity River COMMON VISION program.

Finding COMMON Ground

With a population of 5.5 million, the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex is the nation’s largest inland metropolitan area. To assure an adequate long-term drinking water supply, each of the major branches in the upper watershed has been impounded with mammoth reservoirs. Thus the Trinity River as it flows through the urban core faces great extremes, with low flows composed almost totally of treated wastewater to massive floods with the potential for billions of dollars in damages and untold loss of life across its 240 square mile floodplain.

The cooperative regional effort to manage the Trinity River Corridor began in the early 1980’s when USE began working on a Regional Environmental Impact Statement (Regional EIS) to address the cumulative impacts of individual permitting decisions. A working group of staff from the affected local governments and NCTCOG provided input. The draft of the Regional EIS first compared the cumulative impacts of two opposite philosophical approaches for utilizing the river corridor—maximum environmental quality versus maximum development—and found that maximum development would result in flood flows that would overtop existing levees in Dallas and Irving. Given the seriousness of these preliminary findings, a special Strategy Committee of elected local government officials was formed to assist in the development of the Regional EIS.

As expected, local involvement in USE’s preparation of the final Regional EIS was much more intense, with many meetings and several new development scenarios crafted between the two extremes. The final Regional EIS found that these...
It was now time for local governments to act. In 1990, each of the nine cities (Arlington, Carrollton, Coppell, Dallas, Farmers Branch, Fort Worth, Grand Prairie, Irving, and Lewisville), three counties (Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant), and two special districts (Tarrant Regional Water District and Trinity River Authority) with development and regulatory authority for the Trinity River Corridor executed interlocal agreements with NCTCOG to establish a formal structure for cooperative planning. A Steering Committee of elected officials was formally appointed to provide policy guidance, along with a staff task force for technical support.

NCTCOG, on behalf of the local governments, was identified as the administrative agent to enter into a cost-sharing agreement with the USACE for the Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study. Even at this stage it was recognized that a more comprehensive COMMON VISION program was needed and would be pursued not only with the Corps but other local, state, and federal partners.

**Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study**

In 1990, the first phase of the Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study began as an $8 million six-year effort, with NCTCOG responsible for providing the $4 million non-federal match. In turn, NCTCOG negotiated and administered a $2 million grant from the Texas Water Development Board and obtained the $2 million of local funds on a pro-rata annual formula based on the jurisdiction’s land area within the corridor. NCTCOG’s funding support came from a portion of the local share.

The purpose of the Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study is to seek potentially feasible alternatives for implementation by the participating local governments to address flood damage reduction, water quality, environmental enhancement, recreation, and other related needs throughout the Trinity River Corridor.

The Phase I Information Paper released in early 1995 identified potential projects with a preliminary positive benefit-cost ratio. The paper concluded that seven of the 14 structural flood control measures were economically viable, and a total of 11 water quality improvement and 20 environmental enhancement measures warranted further study. In addition, 38 recreational development measures were also found to be feasible, as well as cooperative approaches to watershed management. In all, more than 100 projects were identified that could justify federal cost-share participation.

The Projects

The second phase of the Upper Trinity River Feasibility Study is currently in progress. This phase identifies implementable projects through Project Management Plans to reduce flood risks, restore environmental values, and meet other study purposes.

Since 1996, projects totaling more than $12 million have been or are being implemented. For a project to be initiated the local entity with jurisdiction must determine its interest and willingness to share in the cost of the project.

The projects currently underway include:

- **Arlington Johnson Creek Buyouts**: The project includes the demolition of 140 structures, mostly homes, that have experienced repeated flooding along Johnson Creek. As of spring 2003, most have been demolished and native habitat restoration has begun.

- **Dallas Floodway/Elm Fork Project**: As part of the larger city efforts, several floodway initiatives are being investigated by the USACE, including: raising the existing levees, lake development, channel meandering, modification of a bridge, and recreation facilities.

- **Clear Fork/West Fork Project**: Tarrant Regional Water District with Fort Worth Stream & Valleys, Inc. is developing a comprehensive master plan to preserve and enhance over 70 miles of river corridor. Recent developments in this project are the announcements by Pier 1 Imports and RadioShack Corporation of plans to build new headquarters on the corridor. NCTCOG’s funding support came from a portion of the local share.

The Partnerships

One key to the success of the Trinity River COMMON VISION program has been meaningful intergovernmental partnerships—among local governments themselves and with federal and state agencies. Whatever is done to reclaim or preserve a river corridor in an urban region requires local government action—zoning, permits, capital with a multi-use trail along the Trinity River Corridor in North Central Texas and northward to the Red River. Significant segments have already been built or are under development.

**Corridor Development Certificate Process**: The studies called for stricter regulation of development within the corridor to stabilize the flood risks. After several years of detailed discussions, an innovative Corridor Development Certificate (CDC) process emerged in the early 1990’s. Local governments still issue the development permit under the National Flood Insurance Program, but common requirements have been added (and adopted by each city in its floodplain ordinance). The CDC process includes USACE review of every CDC request for its flood impact and gives other participating local governments along the corridor 30 days to review and comment upon the development request. While the individual city still makes the final call, it is well understood that a bad decision will land it in court with other cities.