

# Environmental Exchange

A publication of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition

News  
Perspectives  
Book Review  
August 2004

The Houston-Galveston area's most comprehensive coverage of environmental news and events.

## Trans-Texas Corridor spurs controversy

Part one of a two-part look at what the project means for Texas

By Jason Gaskamp

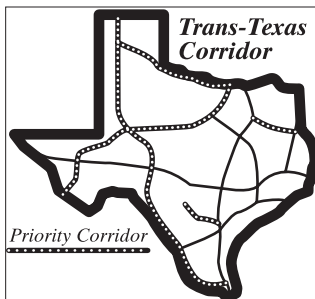
The Texas Transportation Commission, through the Texas Department of Transportation, is paving the way for the Trans-Texas Corridor, a network of freeways and rail lines that will expand Texas' existing transportation network. Environmental and business groups are each taking sides, pitting issues of development and economics against a myriad of environmental concerns.

The project will connect most of Texas in an attempt to make it more adaptable to transportation and more accessible, especially in rural areas. Aspects of the project also include congestion relief, reducing the risk of transporting hazardous materials, and eliminating air pollution found in the larger cities by bypassing them instead of running through them.

According to CorridorWatch.org, an independent group of citizens and officials who are challenging the claims and benefits of the Trans-Texas Corridor, the width of each corridor will reach between 1,000 and 1,200 feet wide. They estimate the project will consume roughly one-half million acres of land before it is finished and reach 4,000 miles in total length, with only 49 percent of those miles being counted for by the four main corridors. Figures for the total cost

range from \$125 billion, a sum that does not include right-of-way and miscellaneous costs, to \$185 billion.

Currently the project includes four priority corridors. Each corridor either parallels an existing freeway by adding onto the structure, or will accompany a proposed freeway. One will run from Denison to the Rio Grande



CorridorWatch.org map showing proposed Trans-Texas Corridor routes and counties.

Valley along Interstate 35, 37 and a proposed Interstate 69. Another will stretch from Texarkana to Houston and then back up to Laredo, along the proposed Interstate 69. Another follows Interstate 45 from Dallas-Fort Worth to Houston, and the last follows Interstate 10 from El Paso to Orange.

The proposed Trans-Texas Corridor will incorporate a series of additional elements, making it unlike any other previous freeway expansion projects. Each corridor will feature separate passenger vehicle lanes and truck lanes, a freight/cargo rail, a commuter rail, and another high-speed passenger rail, with the purpose of safe travel for people and goods. A safety zone, an operational maintenance zone, and a utility zone that will house underground water lines, natural gas and petroleum pipelines, telecommunication cables, and overhead electrical lines will also accompany the corridors.

Frank Blake, the Conservation Chair of

## TCEQ limits proposal for Houston's air

By Dustin Rynders

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is revising its plan to bring Houston's air into compliance with the Clean Air Act, but area environmental groups warn that the timid recommendations the agency proposed on June 23 continue to fall short of protecting public health and make meaningful public involvement difficult.

According to the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention, the TCEQ is not living up to its general commitments to "consider any and all strategies for cleaning Houston's air." Additionally, some TCEQ Commissioners indicate that they may be backing away from TCEQ's commitment to meet new clean air standards by 2007.

The Commission proposed a mid-course review for the Houston-Galveston area's air quality, an update to the Rate-of-Progress portion of the plan, "SIP," for cleaner air, and several rule changes. These rules did not include a number of strategies that area environmental groups hoped would be considered to reduce industrial pollution, which means that formal public debate on those strategies is effectively cut-off. According to GHASP's Executive Director, John Wilson, the agency has "failed to formally open for comment a number of critical rules that could play a useful role" in cleaning up Houston's air.

Wilson wrote a letter to the TCEQ Commissioners with a list of proposals that should be considered. These proposals included further control of industrial emissions of other reactive Volatile Organic Compounds and establishing a more stringent regional cap on industrial nitrogen

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# Environmental Exchange

The Environmental Exchange is published by the Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC), an information clearing-house and communications network for environmental issues in the Houston-Galveston area. The CEC mission is to improve the quality of life and health in the region through education, dialogue, and collaboration. CEC serves the general public by bringing many diverse groups together to build awareness and stimulate discussion about environmental issues in the region. Programs include forums that give a balanced perspective on environmental issues, and information vehicles that enhance understanding.

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## Perspectives

# Community Forum Theater adds human touch to enviro-health outreach

by John Sullivan

At the Armand Bayou Nature Center, an enthusiastic audience watched intently as the Walker family re-enacted the frightful day their family was poisoned by organophosphate emissions from a chemical warehouse fire in Pasadena, Texas. As the facilitator rewound and played this scene again and again, several audience members leapt from their seats to replace Mrs. Walker and show another way to possibly gain a measure of control over this situation. Some of these interventions went nowhere; some took-off and applause erupted. All provoked lively discussion, intense connections, and many personal stories. Ultimately, this forum segued into a discussion of health effects and local toxic exposures among audience members and Jonathan Ward, PhD, the deputy director of University of Texas Medical Branch's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Center.

You might ask why objective science would ever jump into the deep waters of community beliefs and the pervading suspicion that most institutions seldom serve the needs of citizens. The short explanation boils down to the science / community disconnect, a phenomenon that is only gaining momentum: science has further specialized and communities with ever more urgent environmental needs may have little patience left for the gradual scientific processes of discovery and validation. To create effective environmental health links among communities, health-care providers and environmental health scientists, it is necessary to translate epidemiology and toxicology concepts into public speech and images. This process has crystallized around the concepts of Environmental Justice and Community-Based Participatory Research.

The NIEHS Center at UTMB in Galveston has created a Public Forum and Toxics Assistance Division within its Community Outreach and Education Program that deploys both scientific toxicological consultation and a unique, dramatic form of educational practice and public dialogue, Community Environmental Forum Theater. This embodied Forum is based on a system of

applied social issue theater developed by Augusto Boal of Brazil.

In Forum Theater workshops, a multi-generational group of community members with little or no prior acting experience learns to represent and communicate concepts from environmental toxicology, risk assessment and environmental justice using interactive games and body sculptures. These exercises are reconfigured to create an ethnographic record of community beliefs and attitudes toward hot-button environmental issues, and to create an imagistic blueprint for building a healthier environment.

Ultimately, the workshop creates scenes that depict adverse outcomes of environmental assaults. These "toxic scenes" are left unfinished with a frustrated protagonist in an oppressive situation that begs for repair. When these vignettes are later performed on stage—as in the Walker's story—the forum facilitator encourages audience members to stop the action, physically walk into the scene, replace the protagonist and show how they would change the outcome with strategic words and bold actions. The embodied proposals offered by these audience volunteers set the tone for further dialogue, discussion and solidarity.

As the Walker family folded together in a final image of mutual shelter from that toxic fire-storm, the poignancy of their situation became real and undeniable. And every Forum delivers this same core message: environmental health has a human face, epidemiological statistics are actually people in need. When science and citizens gather to represent our shared struggles as Forum Theater, these faces and their needs shine through the issues and the facts. And we all become more humanized in the process.

For information contact John Sullivan: (409) 747-1246, [josulliv@utmb.edu](mailto:josulliv@utmb.edu), or Bryan Parras, Outreach Coord. at Nuestra Palabra: (713) 303-5811, [lucas77@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lucas77@sbcglobal.net).

*John Sullivan is the Co-Director of the Public Forum and Toxics Assistance Division at the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences @ UTMB.*

# Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral

by Charles Siebert

New York: Three Rivers Press (1998)

ISBN 0-609-80268-2

Reviewed by Steven Wolfe

Wickerby, Charles Siebert's brilliant environmental memoir, does not have the most promising beginning. Escaping the rough city to find himself; an unresolved personal relationship; the contrast between New York and any given rural spot—we might begin preparing ourselves for more half-baked Thoreauvian primitivism, the type of self-congratulatory personal-encounter literature that is the Harlequin Romance of the environmental crowd.

Fortunately Siebert, a fine poet and essayist, has something far more nuanced in mind for his examination of the relationship between what we call the urban and rural worlds than simple opposition. Intelligent, beautifully crafted, and wholly original, his book leads us on a journey that justifies the seemingly oxymoronic subtitle *An Urban Pastoral*, interrogating and ultimately breaking down the definitions that divide those words and worlds.

Faced with a neighborhood and a relationship, the apparent disorder and tenuousness of which he is increasingly powerless to grasp and over which he has no control, Siebert flees to the rural isolation of Wickerby, a cabin in the woods of southern Quebec. There are significant differences in Siebert's version of this familiar setup: for one thing, the cabin belongs not to him but to his girlfriend Bex's family, and holds many of her most significant memories—Siebert finds his way there on the recall of a single brief visit six years previously. What he finds is a dwelling that is crumbling from a degree of neglect as profound as that which has been tearing apart the urban setting he is escaping, and implying a similar neglect in his relationship with Bex. The process of coming to perceive Wickerby clearly—as a real place rather than as a collection of preconceived notions—and find the buried relationship between the world of Wickerby and the world of Brooklyn parallels, of course, the same attempt in regard to Bex and himself.

In a book packed with striking images, one of the most memorable comes early: in the midst of an inexplicable epidemic of

tree-theft in his neighborhood, Siebert offers the sight of doormen guarding shrubs with baseball bats, saplings chained to boulders, and “a bright green . . . vehicle rac[ing] by with lights and sirens blaring, and a tree on its side in the back.” This pathetic, hilarious, and thought-provoking image serves as an appropriate introduction to a work that is predicated on surprising juxtapositions. Here in the heart of concrete civilization, for example, a single tree is so highly valued that it rates its own ambulance. While we expect destruction of urban nature, we are far less accustomed to note the intense focus this environment fosters. If such care were lavished on each tree in a forest, old-growth clearcuts would cease.

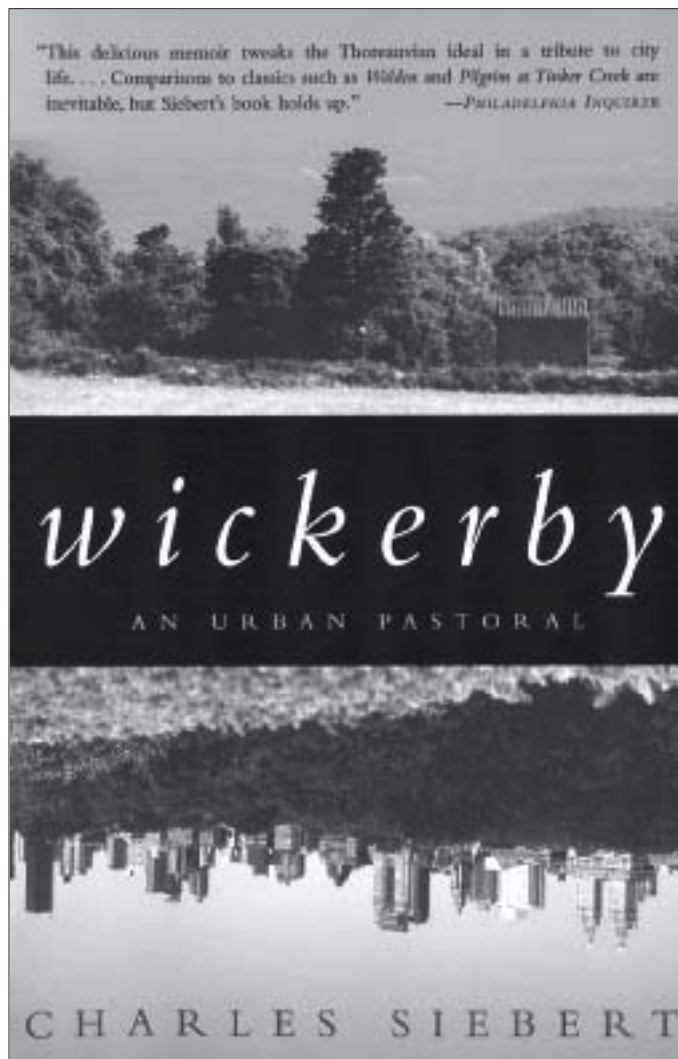
Whether this intense focus is altogether good is a separate matter; the point is that our expectations are instantly challenged. Siebert has an eye for the vividly significant

image, and his dry sense of humor is a welcome respite from the High Solemnity that pervades environmental memoir. What becomes clear, through his eyes, is that the division between the “wild” and the “civilized” is merely a question of definition and degree. The little neighborhood of Wickerby is just as crowded, crumbling and unpredictable as Brooklyn; skyscrapers tower in both places, whether built by humans or by ants; the foundations of streets, cabins, and relationships collapse, and the means of reconstruction are in each case frustratingly ungraspable.

The ultimate importance of Wickerby lies in Siebert's insight that

the reconciliation of Urban and Pastoral demands recognition of the mutuality of existence—the impossibility of defining one against the other because they are fundamentally the same. Thus we must understand the human world as equally “natural” and worthy of being perceived—and judged—on the same level as all other environments. Not to do so means removing ourselves and our works from nature entirely. Siebert is no deluded misanthrope, no Romantic Luddite; his conclusions are deeply humanistic: to accept the modern urban world, in concert with all other environments, as valid and full of meaning for us because it is most fully our own creation and an expression of our nature.

Steven Wolfe received his doctorate from the University of Houston in 2003.



# TCEQ

*Continued from page 1*

oxides emissions in East Harris County. According to GHASP's analysis of air quality monitoring data gathered by TCEQ, Houston's most unhealthy air is in the industrial areas located along the Houston Ship Channel between the 610 East Loop and Deer Park. GHASP's report "Where Does Houston's Smog Come From" found that in the most heavily polluted areas of the Houston Ship Channel, an individual's lifetime cancer risk is 1,000 times higher than the Clean Air Act's goals.

Despite the health risks of not doing more to reduce industrial emissions from businesses in the Houston Ship Channel, TCEQ excluded a number of potentially helpful solutions from its original proposal. Several of TCEQ's recommended proposals are likely to produce some moderate benefits, but, according to Wilson, "the TCEQ has not presented an effective strategy for protecting public health."

The Clean Air Act requires states to meet basic clean air standards to continue receiving federal highway funds, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has changed the basic standards for complying with the act and postponed the compliance deadline. Some officials at TCEQ now

question whether the state should remain true to its previous commitments for improved air quality in the shorter term or simply shift focus to the new EPA standards, which allow more time to pass before meaningful improvement in the region's air quality. Environmental groups including GHASP and Environmental Defense have called on TCEQ to keep prior commitments to the citizens of Texas and stay focused on public health above threats of lost highway dollars.

TCEQ committed itself to bringing the Houston-Galveston region into compliance with the one-hour ozone standard by 2007. At the TCEQ Commissioner's Agenda on May 26, the commissioners had an extended conversation about whether the region must continue to meet the one-hour standard in the Houston-Galveston region in light of the EPA's new eight-hour standard, but no definitive conclusion was reached.

The one-hour standard requires that air pollution not exceed national standard over any one-hour period of time. Since that time, the EPA has embraced a new eight-hour standard that is generally more protective than the one-hour standard because it considers the average air quality over an eight hour period. Still, the Houston-Galveston area would not be forced to comply with the eight-hour standard until at least 2010 and

will likely apply for an extension that would not require compliance until 2013.

In addition to the delay in the new standard, there are gaps in the protection that the new standard would offer. According to a GHASP analysis of 2000 through 2003 air quality data, only the one-hour standard was breached on about 7 percent of the days where one of the two standards was breached. This means that a sole focus on the eight-hour standard could leave Houston residents breathing unhealthy air about three more days per year than a dual standard. While acknowledging that the eight-hour standard might not effectively protect the public from one-hour health effects, the EPA will likely abandon the one-hour standard to avoid issues presented by enforcing the standard.

TCEQ will hold public hearings on the proposal in Houston, Beaumont and Austin during the first week of August and will accept written comments through August 9. While TCEQ has limited the solutions that are open for formal comment, concerned members of the public can take advantage of this opportunity to comment on the current proposal.

*Dustin Rynders is a law student and policy analyst at the University of Houston.*

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## Eco Notes

### Wind power for old oil rigs

*Solar Access.com*

Talk about a transformation, a unique arrangement off the coast of Louisiana could soon allow wind turbines to be placed on derelict off-shore oil rigs.

Backers of a plan to generate electricity using wind turbines mounted on off-shore Louisiana oil rigs are developing a 10 MW pilot project, called Grand Vent, with three rigs off the state's southwest coast.

Herman Schellstede of Wind Energy Systems Technology said the company hopes to have one of three turbines in place by the end of the year. Federal regulations require oil companies to remove inactive offshore platforms within one year after they cease production, and removal costs can go as high as US \$40 million.

Using a dormant platform for wind energy can prevent costly decommissioning and give the rig new life. Public Service

Commission officials are working on a wind energy study with the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

Using an existing oil platform for a wind turbine also cuts out the high costs associated with construction of off-shore wind turbine footings by using an existing structure that can no longer satisfy its intended purpose.

"Grand Vent will show whether the combination of consistent offshore wind, modern wind-turbine technology and unused oil platforms can produce clean and inexpensive power for Louisiana," Public Service Commissioner Frank Campbell said. "I am greatly encouraged by what we have learned so far. Louisiana is a leader in off-shore energy production, and generating energy from wind may continue and extend that tradition well into the future."

### Sierra Club report attacks Bush wildlands policies

Padre Island National Seashore, threatened by BNP Petroleum's "aggressive

drilling campaign" is one of 25 places highlighted in the Sierra Club report, Wildlands at Risk. The report is a sampling of wild places across the country, many of them popular vacation spots, representing the kinds of threats America's wildlands face from Bush administration policies, according to a Sierra Club press release.

"The stories in this report show the scope and magnitude of the Bush administration's assault on America's wild heritage," said Rusty Middleton of the Sierra Club in Texas. "The administration's policies are reversing decades of progress on public lands protection and could destroy forever some of our most cherished hiking, hunting, fishing and camping spots."

Just last week, the Bush administration proposed revoking protections for America's last remaining wild forests, replacing the Roadless Area Conservation Rule with a system that forces governors to petition the Forest Service to not construct roads in or otherwise develop inventoried wild roadless forest areas.

# Science and food: The genetically modified future

By Melody Reid

It's a familiar scene—perusing the produce section at the local grocer's—mountains of bright reds, yellows, and greens, perfectly shaped fruits and vegetables arranged in rows under florescent lights. This is the bounty of genetically modified foods, altered to create the most aesthetically pleasing tomato, or the perfect ear of corn.

Combining genes from different organisms is known as recombinant DNA technology, and the resulting organism is said to be genetically modified or transgenic. GM products include medicines and vaccines (for instance insulin for diabetics), foods and food ingredients, feeds, and fibers. While the United States embraces this technology, concerns about the long-term effects remain.

Some concerns include the fear that genes from genetically modified plants might transfer to other plant species to cause genetic pollution or cross-contamination and create invasive superweeds. It has been suggested that these genes would allow a plant to compete aggressively with other plants and wipe them out. Critics of GM are also concerned that possible gene flow between genetically modified crops and other plants may damage biodiversity, and that pest-resistant crops could take away important food sources for wildlife.

Biotechnology promises to enhance food taste or quality, increase food nutrients and crop yields, and improve resistance to pests and herbicides, but studies as to the validity of these claims are ongoing.

While claims of herbicide and pest resistance spearhead the arguments supporting gene modification technology, recent reports are indicating that the benefits are not as big as originally believed.

Charles Benbrook, director of the Northwest Science and Environment Policy Center in Sand Point, Idaho, found that when first introduced, most of the crops needed up to 25 percent fewer chemicals for the first three years, but afterward they required significantly more.

"There's now clear evidence that the average pounds of herbicides applied per acre planted to herbicide-tolerant varieties have increased compared to the first few years," said Benbrook in his 2003 report based on U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics.



Sarah Morgan

*The Houston Farmer's Market is one option for organic produce like watermelons, peppers and tomatoes.*

GMO's are capturing global headlines this month with the European Member states voting to block the import of genetically modified foods from biotech giant Monsanto. Also recently announced, Syngenta, another biotechnology company working on genetically modified crops, is moving its headquarters from Britain to the United States. In 2003, the United States accounted for over two-thirds of all biotechnology crops planted globally, according to the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology.

Despite the prevalence of genetically modified foods in recent headlines, it seems the local public is still unaware of the issue. Even educated consumers find difficulty in making their food purchases. With genetically modified foods becoming the norm at local

grocery stores, many consumers who may know about the controversial products are left with little choice in the matter. In Houston, a new outcropping of local farmer's markets and the growing popularity of stores like Whole Foods may provide some relief, but just how much is questionable.

Currently in the United States there are no labeling requirements in place for genetically altered foods. There are, however, labels for Certified Organic, foods that are produced without synthetic chemicals (e.g.: fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, or hormones) and are free of genetically modified organisms, and do not use genetically modified seeds. If a consumer wants to avoid purchasing GM foods, it seems that the best

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# Coalition Notes

## HOLA announces scholarship for 2004-2005

Houston Outdoor Learning Academy, announces the availability of scholarships for the 2004 through 2005 school year. HOLA provides an adventure-based school coupled with integrated outdoors and environmental education objectives, international travel, and community service elements for students in grades six through twelve. The scholarships provide educational opportunities for students who enjoy the outdoors to learn in an accredited school. This summer, HOLA has devoted their time to upgrading the school and landscape and they are asking for volunteers to help with landscaping, gardening, planting and other projects, to contact them. Students may count work hours toward community service. For more information contact, Dan and Laura Zimmerman at (713) 224-4652 or visit [www.holainfo.com](http://www.holainfo.com).

## Native Plant Society of Texas Wildscapes Workshop

The Houston chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas is currently accepting registration for their seventh annual Wildscapes Workshop and Plant Sale; Landscaping with native plants to attract wildlife. The event will be held Saturday, September 11 from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. and will include a book sale, a plant sale with hard to find plants, exhibits, lectures, door prizes and more. For more information or to register, contact Glenn Olson at [houston@npsot.org](mailto:houston@npsot.org) or (281) 345-4151.

## Trees for Houston maintains ongoing projects

Trees for Houston, an organization dedicated to the planting of trees along residential neighborhoods and commercial freeways, continues to add green landscape that beautifies and helps the environment by keeping the air clean for Houstonians. According to Trees for Houston's Web site, ongoing projects and past accomplishments continue with success. "Trees For Houston has embraced all available resources of training and counsel to secure knowledgeable information to achieve our goals to plant street trees economically, proficiently, successfully and responsibly. Correct and thorough maintenance and

monitoring has made possible the high rate of success observed in our plantings." The tree plantings are in agreement with the City of Houston neighborhoods as well as with the Texas Department of Transportation. Currently Trees for Houston has planted over 168,990 trees throughout Houston. For more information and information on proposed parkways plantings contact, (713) 840-8733 or visit [www.treesforhouston.org](http://www.treesforhouston.org).

## The Woodlands recycling effort celebrates 15 years

The Woodlands GREEN (grassroots education environment network), recycling efforts began in 1989 when a few concerned citizens called themselves Recycle the Woodlands. Their focus and goals have been to educate the community about nature resource conservation and recycling. After 15 years, the organization continues their ecological mission along with community projects that recently included an organized e-scrap recycles of computers with several organizations and over 60 volunteers that helped collect over 41,000 pounds of electronics for recycling. Some of the major events this year included The Woodlands Earth Day where over 8,000 attended, and Walk in the Woods Lecture Series. For more information contact (281) 210-3900 or visit [www.thewoodlandsgreen.org/default.htm](http://www.thewoodlandsgreen.org/default.htm).

## Texas Environmental Leadership Conference

The Texas Public Interest Research Group, in conjunction with Texas Impact and the University of Houston-Downtown Scholars Academy, will host the Second Annual Texas Environmental Leadership Conference on Saturday, October 16, 2004, at the University of Houston-Downtown.

Last year's conference brought over one hundred students, citizen activists and environmental professionals from across the state to learn organizing skills, be briefed on the key environmental challenges facing Texas, and network with others to plan results-oriented campaigns in our communities. Workshops last year included: Learning about the plight of sea turtles on the Texas coast from Carole Allen of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, inside tips on working with the media from Houston Chronicle Environment reporter Dina Cappiello, research training from Cyrus Reed of the Texas Center for Policy Studies, an air

quality testing training from the Texas Bucket Brigade, Information on how to start a community garden by Dr. Randall of Urban Harvest, and a presentation about the importance of environmental activism by Congressman Chris Bell.

To RSVP or sign up for regular updates about the event, e-mail Luke Metzger at [luke@texpirg.org](mailto:luke@texpirg.org). This event is possible thanks to the generous support of the Houston Endowment.

## Bob Stokes new Galveston Bay Foundation president

The Galveston Bay Foundation is pleased to announce that Bob Stokes has accepted an offer to serve as president of the Foundation. On June 15, Bob moved into the role of President to serve as the chief staff member of the Foundation. This position was formerly known as executive director at GBF.

Stokes served as chair of the Foundation's board of trustees the past two years and served as an executive committee member for two years prior to that.

Stokes brings a new set of skills to the role of President for GBF, as he has practiced for the last ten years as an environmental lawyer. After graduating from Yale University in 1990 with a bachelor's degree and the University of Texas School of Law in 1994, Stokes began his legal career at the office of Blackburn & Carter, where he worked for two years. After that, he moved to the Harris County Attorney's Office where he practiced for nearly eight years, specializing in environmental enforcement matters.

"I am very much looking forward to my new role as President with the Galveston Bay Foundation," Stokes said. "As chair of the board for the last two years, I've been acutely aware of the problems this Foundation has faced. But I've become more convinced than ever about this Foundation's potential. There is a real need in our community for an organization like GBF and I plan to work with all the users of Galveston Bay to ensure that we find a path to success. I am honored to have been chosen by my fellow board members for this role and I intend to make sure that this Foundation is something of which the whole community can be proud." ■

# Trans-Texas

*Continued from page 1*

Sierra Club's Houston Group, said the project will "create wildlife barriers through much of the land and initially divide the state into separate segments." Like a giant wall, the corridors could block wildlife from migrating and limit the habitat of other species. There is equal concern about the possibility of damage or destruction to sensitive ecosystems from the construction and development of the corridors.

According to TxDOT, however, steps and precautions are being taken to protect the environment. "There are misconceptions that we short-change the environmental concerns in our plans for development. We can have both development and environmental protection, and we make sure we do that," said TxDOT spokesperson Gaby Garcia.

Referring to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Garcia said they have followed the required steps in planning for the Texas-Trans Corridor. "The act only allows for federal approval once a thorough study of the environmental impact has been completed, including documenting, analyzing, and reviewing all possible impacts to assess their threat. Until that process is completed, a department is hindered from obtaining right-of-ways, purchasing land, and beginning construction."

Opponents like Blake feel that although the intentions of the TxDOT are good, "any environmentalists who are familiar with the TxDOT's planning process and history know how those [environmental] concerns are either not taken seriously or are overruled by special interest with political connections."

Regional Representative of the Houston Sierra Club Christine Sagstetter, who has done extensive research on the Trans-Texas

Corridor, believes these crucial steps of documenting and analyzing are either not being done properly or are being grossly sidestepped.

In two instances given by Sagstetter, both occurring in Spring in North Harris County, a member's complaint from the local community about how one route of the corridor would cut through a cemetery was repeatedly omitted from documentation. Another route calls for the removal of homes because it runs through one of the subdivisions. This too was neglected by the department in the documentation, said Sagstetter.

Sagstetter responded to these examples as "direct economic hits to the local community, and are consequences that are not being identified by documentation. The state considers the process completed once they produce a document, even though that document may fail to follow the complete process and show the real impacts."

While opponents argue the effects of the projects could be environmentally devastating, Garcia claims not building the multi-use transportation system could be equally devastating for the future economy of Texas.

She said, "planning the project means meeting the needs for the future and preparing for population growth and travel. We need to address that growth, and if the infrastructure is not there, then businesses will go elsewhere."

Garcia said that the potential of the Trans-Texas corridor becomes an economic asset for Texas because it will bring accessibility to the rural areas and provide economic growth in the form of jobs and markets, making Texas a more competitive state for business. The construction of the future corridor will bring increased activity and expansion along its routes, especially in the form of business ventures that could pop up along the

freeways, she said.

Such business ventures include gas stations, garages, restaurants, hotels, stores, and warehouses along with passenger train stations, bus stations, and parking facilities for travel along the corridors.

Sagstetter questions such intentions. It will "instead disturb rural open spaces and operating farms, ranches, and country communities, and remove land from local government and school tax revenues without giving anything back to the community," she said. "Private-citizens will be robbed of the opportunity to participate in revenue producing ventures along the corridor once their land is acquired."

Other concerns include air pollution in communities as sections of the corridor run through farmland and small towns. TxDOT claims a priority of the corridor will be to eliminate the pollution in large cities since the corridor is designed to bypass them, but opponents argue the corridor will only bring the pollution out into the country, shifting vehicle fumes and exhaust from one location to another. They argue the same for congestion relief and the transportation of hazardous materials, and that attempting to move the problem out of the larger cities will only increase the problem across Texas instead of eliminating it.

The congestion in larger cities is another of Blake's main concerns. Even though the project intends to bypass cities and thereby re-route the congestion, it will be left up to the major cities to connect themselves to the corridors.

"The issue of tying into metropolitan areas is still unclear, and any attempt will only increase the congestion as more access structures are crammed into the cities and new traffic situations will be created," he said.

Since the larger cities are left to contend with their own solution to connecting to the corridors, they are also left to deal with the financial burden of doing so, meaning they will not receive any of the funding that will be going to the corridor project.

Meetings and public hearing are constantly planned as opponent groups like corridor-watch.org, the Sierra Club, and individual citizens continue to challenge the project. For a more visit [www.corridorwatch.org](http://www.corridorwatch.org).

*Jason Gaskamp is an English student at the University of Houston and has written for the Daily Cougar.*



David Stall

*At the March TxDOT public hearing in LaGrange, the room was filled with citizens and elected officials discussing the Trans-Texas Corridor.*

# Genetically modified

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they can do is to purchase organic.

Inquiring directly with grocers is sometimes a frustrating option. On a recent trip to a Randall's in North Houston, neither of the employees working in the produce section was familiar with the term Genetically Modified Organism. They could not say how much, if any, of the produce on hand was genetically altered.

A quick phone call to Whole Foods on Kirby and West Alabama served as helpful.

"We do not carry anything that's a GMO," said Angel Gonzales, the produce manager at Whole Foods. "This is a natural food store, so we try to stick to foods that are in their natural state."

Whole Food's official stance can be found in a store brochure where it states, "we are concerned about the disruptive effect genetic engineering may have on our environment and whether long-term human health issues have been thoroughly addressed."

Shopping at local Co-ops and Farmer's Markets gives consumers the option of

purchasing organic foods that have been locally grown. The Central City Co-op at 2115 Taft, and the Houston Farmer's Market at 3106 White Oak, both in Houston, provide a vast assortment of organic fruits and vegetables.

Urban Harvest is another option. Urban Harvest is a nonprofit organization that helps start community gardens and offers classes on growing fruits and vegetables. They are also working to start a farmer's market in central Houston. Bob Randall, executive director of Urban Harvest said, "Urban Harvest is strongly committed to organics. We advocate and teach sustainable approaches."

The controversy and debate on genetic engineering doesn't stop with just fruits and vegetables, either. A new study published on June 8, 2004 by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, involved growth hormone transgenic coho salmon, which have greater appetites and can grow up to seven times bigger than wild cohos. The fish were divided into three separate groups and were given varied amounts of food. As long as the food was plentiful, all groups thrived. However, when faced with food shortages, the GM salmon became

more aggressive and muscled-out the wild fish for the food. Also, the survival rate of the GM fish showed a significant reduction when faced with food shortages. Many GM-fish appeared to have died from attacks and there were several instances of cannibalism. Comparatively, the fish in the wild-salmon only group fared very well. During the 14-week food shortage, the wild salmon showed a constant increase in population biomass.

Despite the controversies, GM products continue to stock the shelves. The 10/15 supersweet onion, and the seedless watermelons and broccoflower are not new items in the produce section of our local grocers. Other recent GM developments are Golden Rice, rice genetically fortified with Vitamin A, and Bt Cotton, which is cotton that produces a toxin to bollworms, a major cotton pest. With the adoption of food animals in the experimentation (as with the salmon), the capacity of gene insertion technology to change our world has brought us to a crossroads of fundamental importance. ■

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