

Notorious apartments poisoned this part of Far East Dallas. Now a new park and trails bring hope

Ferguson Road Initiative's decades-long battle shows the spark that greenspace provides for redevelopment.



Under the direction of the Texas Trees Foundation, Far East Dallas residents gathered to plant 50 trees at the new White Rock Hills Park. The Celebration for the greenspace is set for Nov. 6. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

The 3.5 acres at 2229 Highland Road, a Far East Dallas crossroads where million-dollar homes give way to modest ones, was for years a stinking mess — a sorry symbol of how crime can poison a once-stable community.

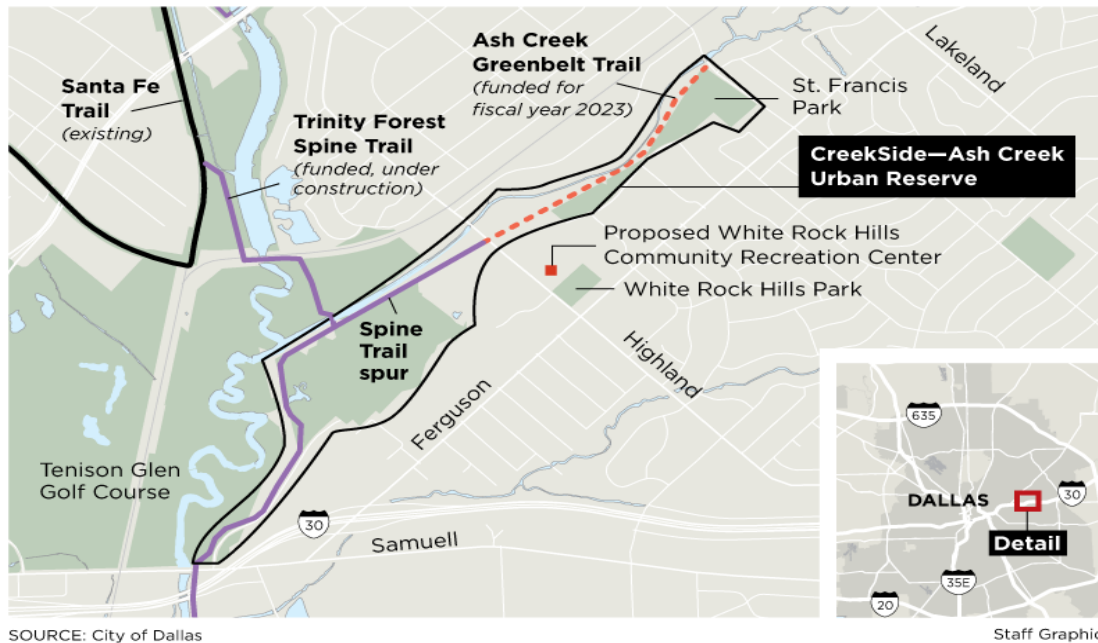
The Rosewood Apartments — home base for unchecked operations of gang members and drug dealers in the late 1980s and early 1990s — spread fear in all directions and dared its neighbors to try to live a good life.

When a suspicious blaze destroyed a chunk of the complex in 1994 — leaving a deteriorating mess of police tape, graffiti tags and broken glass and brick — the property owner simply turned the site into a dumping ground for concrete and rock remains.

A decades-long fight later, waged by the most stubborn and committed community members I have ever met, this former spot of rot has blossomed into a park and a gateway to a greenbelt trail system for residents starved of recreation options.

On Nov. 6, neighbors — many of them part of the nonprofit powerhouse Ferguson Road Initiative, which has repeatedly mobilized on behalf of Far East Dallas — will gather for the grand opening of White Rock Hills Park and CreekSide-Ash Creek urban reserve.

Big steps in Far East Dallas



“From blight to delight” is how Vikki Martin, FRI’s executive director, describes how big a deal this is for the area, just north of Interstate 30 and near the intersection of Highland and Ferguson roads.

I hardly needed her explanation to understand the transformation I was looking at.

During years of commuting from my southeast Dallas home and later from Rockwall, Highland Road was my shortcut into downtown on the many days that I-30 backed up. I saw in real time as things went bad in that stretch of the city – to the point that I avoided the area entirely.

White Rock Hills residents didn’t have that option.

That’s why this moment is about much more than a park, even a shiny new one with a walking loop, two playgrounds, a stone pavilion and sports field.

And it’s even bigger than the opening of CreekSide, an almost 4.5-acre stretch of blackland prairie along Ash Creek. A trail running through the greenbelt will connect to the under-construction Trinity Forest Spine Trail as well as provide children a safe walking route to area schools.

The recreation hub already is attracting new mixed-income housing for this ethnically and economically diverse community of more than 35,000 residents.

From the park, you can see the rooftops of new David Weekley homes priced at about \$500,000 — almost all of them already sold. In the other direction are the Ferguson Townhomes, which developer Gary Hasty, a Ferguson Road Initiative board member, has marketed at about \$270,000 to mostly first-time homebuyers.

Across the street from the park is affordable multi-family and senior housing as well as Heroes House, which Hasty developed to provide decent dwellings for formerly homeless veterans.

Improvement plans are also on the drawing board for the nearby Claremont Village shopping center.

Another lesson in this neighborhood victory is that great things can happen when local elected leaders summon the will to do the right thing.

This portion of Far East Dallas has long been split between two City Council districts, and too often, political territorialism has set back progress. But council members Adam Bazaldua and Paula Blackmon chose a different path — working together on behalf of these often-overlooked neighborhoods and living up to their promises.

Dallas County Commissioner Theresa Daniel has also been huge in securing \$3 million for the Ash Creek Trail, which will connect the White Rock Hills and St. Francis parks. She also helped with funding for the Highland Road infrastructure work, which will bring bike lanes, sidewalks and enhanced lighting to the neighborhood.

But none of this success happens without **the never-say-die Ferguson Road Initiative** and its volunteer corps.

The nonprofit represents more than 30 neighborhoods that are home to about 93,000 people in an area bounded by Garland Road, Interstate 635, the Mesquite city limits and Interstate 30. Forty-six percent of those residents are Latino, 30% are white, 20% are Black, and 4% identify as other.

The southern end of that swath has long been a recreation desert.

That's why, at Ferguson Road Initiative's urging, the city's Park and Recreation Department bought the 2229 Highland Road property in 2008. Thirteen years later, it's now a real park where volunteers planted 50 new trees earlier this month.



Volunteers planted trees Oct. 23 at White Rock Hills Park around the playground equipment, pavilion and walking trail. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

To the new park's north and west are Forest Hills and Highland on the Creek; in the other direction are the White Rock Hills and White Rock East communities. While both White Rock Lake and Samuell-Grand Park are easily accessible from the wealthier neighborhoods, that's not the case for the more modest ones.

“In less than a quarter-mile from this park, you’ve got some of the wealthiest people in the city of Dallas living just adjacent to some of the very poorest,” Martin said. “Then you have middle-income people like me — teachers, city employees, firefighters and police officers in good 1950s cottages.”

Among Ferguson Road Initiative’s many collaborators on the CreekSide and White Rock Hills Park projects is the Circuit Trail Conservancy, which is working with the city to build a loop trail within Dallas.

At the southern end of the CreekSide urban reserve, the conservancy broke ground this year on phase one of the Trinity Forest Spine Trail, which will connect the existing Santa Fe Trail to Samuell Boulevard and, eventually continue through southern Dallas to the Trinity River Audubon Center.

This phase also includes a connector from the main Spine Trail to Highland Road adjacent to the White Rock Hills Park. There’s also talk of off-road bike trails in the CreekSide greenbelt and perhaps new ways to access Samuell-Grand Park.

If it feels like a million moving pieces — it is. But they are all moving in the right direction.

Next up for Martin and Ferguson Road Initiative is the White Rock Hills recreation center that residents have been clamoring for since 1995. The starts and stops for this project — long a top priority for Martin’s nonprofit — are too many to recount today.

Most important is that Martin is optimistic, thanks to Blackmon and Bazaldua, that the next city bond program vote will include money to build a rec center on property adjacent to the new park that the city already owns.

Far East Dallas, forgotten for too long, still has great needs. “Until we shone the light on the neglect, no one was looking at what’s happening here,” Martin reminded me. “We are not finished, just because this happens.”

But first, Martin and her team will take a break Nov. 6 to celebrate putting a stop to the poisoning of this again-vibrant community.

The celebration of the new White Rock Hills Park and CreekSide’s future will be 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Nov. 6 at 2229 Highland Road, with parking available at Claremont Village shopping center. Activities will include family-oriented games, entertainment and arts, bulb-planting and a COVID-19 vaccine clinic.



Sharon Grigsby. I’m the Metro columnist, which means that if it’s happening in North Texas, I’m likely to write about it. My work on Baylor’s sexual assault scandal earned a spot as a 2018 Pulitzer finalist. I was born in Waco, raised my own family in the suburbs and have been back in Dallas ever since.

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