

METRO

‘Ultramodern’ subdivision forecast the future



PAULA ALLEN

I enjoy reading your columns and wonder if you could assist us. We are the Greater Harmony Hills Neighborhood Association, and our neighborhood

Harmony Hills is celebrating 60 years as a community. We have plat evidence that tells us the first houses went up in 1959 by the Zachry Co. with over 13 builders including Uptmore Homes and Lloyd Booth. Many of these builders are deceased or in their 90s, and the stories of their builds or Parade of Homes or the style of houses are sketchy. Could you assist us in more history of who we are? We are pulling facts together and would like some human-interest stories for our Sept. 23 birthday celebration.
— **Patty Gibbons, president, Greater Harmony Hills Neighborhood Association**

The first residents of Harmony Hills were practically the Jetsons. No, they didn’t have robot maids or flying cars, but they were offered many amenities that became standard in late 20th-century homes.

The first houses in the neighborhood, mostly built during its first five years, were very different from the ones in which those first homeowners grew up and could almost have been planned in reaction to them. And what were considered fresh, modern touches – then “affordable luxury” – were soon taken for granted even in relatively modest apartments.

Harmony Hills was announced in the San Antonio Express, March 15, 1959, as a development of 478 acres acquired by the H.B. Zachry Co. The land straddled San Pedro Avenue, with 50 acres to the east to be developed later. The lots were to be sold directly to builders; Zachry won the contracts for city water, lights, gas and sewers and would build the streets.

About 20 builders at that time had purchased land; 16 had signed up for an ambitious goal – to have model homes ready for the third annual Parade of Homes scheduled for Sept. 3-4, 1959. Sponsored by the San Antonio Home Builders Association,



File photo

An ad from the July 30, 1961, San Antonio Express shows off midcentury style and emphasizes central air conditioning in the Enchanted Village section of Harmony Hills, north of Loop 410.

tion, the event that year showcased five subdivisions off Loop 13 (later 410). Harmony Hills was the newest; the others were Castle Park Unit 3, Colonial Hills, Dreamland Oaks and Lackland City. Loopland was the future – bigger houses, longer commutes and near-mandatory car travel.

At just six-tenths of a mile north of the Loop, Harmony Hills was promoted as “ideal” for active-duty military or civilian staff at Fort Sam Houston and Randolph AFB. The first homeowners bought the pitch: Homer A. Napier was a civilian employee in personnel at Fort Sam and his wife, Martha, taught at Garner Junior High School. Their two children, Albert and Margaret, were students at MacArthur High School. When they first saw the neighborhood, “our only neighbors were birds, rabbits and rattlesnakes,” Mrs. Napier told the Express for a fifth anniversary story, Aug. 15, 1964. “There just wasn’t anything here.” They took possession of 235 Serenade Drive on Aug. 20, 1959, three days before even the Parade preview houses were supposed to be ready. The gas line wasn’t;

they had to heat water in an electric kettle for washing and shaving for a few days.

While the first family of Harmony Hills went off to work and school, construction kicked into high gear. Zachry sold hundreds of lots to an eventual total of 24 local builders, who needed to recoup their costs by selling houses. The Parade of Homes was an open-house event that allowed serious buyers and looky-loos alike to visit the model homes (usually including a builder’s sales office) for 25 cents per subdivision or 50 cents for all. After that, someone – usually a “hostess” – would have to be at the models from 2-10 p.m. a couple of weeknights and all day on weekends.

The first streets with finished houses were on Serenade, Tammy and Patricia, in that order.

Those model homes were dressed to sell. Harmony Hills was often advertised as “the ultramodern subdivision,” so the builders’ show homes, built on spec, were filled with modern conveniences and decorated by furniture stores and interior-design firms. The average price for the Parade houses was

\$15,000 to \$20,000 (when the national average was \$12,400), fully loaded with central air-conditioning, built-in furniture and TV sets, dishwashers, garbage disposals, glass shower stalls, terrazzo tile and parquet flooring, mahogany paneling and scenic wallpaper.

Buyers could pay with GI (no money down), FHA (low down payment) or conventional loans, and payments could be as low as \$120 a month. That price probably would require them to pass up the extras, start with a bare lot marked by sticks and string and resist upselling.

Most houses in the neighborhood – the range was \$13,500 to \$25,000 – measured at least 2,000 square feet; three bedrooms, two baths and a family room were typical, although some builders offered four- or two-bedroom plans and living/dining-room combinations. All had attached two-car garages, the better to take advantage of the wide (42-foot) streets, curved to slow down traffic and planned to get everyone out to the access streets efficiently.

Most were ranch-type houses,

built on one floor, with no porches but a sliding glass door to the patio in the back. Décor touches and trim gave them Early American Colonial style or “Oriental”/Polynesian with a covered lanai instead of a patio. There was a 50 percent masonry requirement, and some were all masonry – red or painted white brick, off-white Austin cut stone, pink or yellow native stone. Many lots (a then-generous 75 to 90 feet wide and 140 feet deep) had mature trees that had been spared by the developers, and some had great views – the “Hills” of the name referred to the neighborhood’s elevation of 900 to 930 feet, compared with downtown’s 600 feet above sea level.

It was an attractive vision, with 10 families moving in during each of the first six months. After a year, most of the original lots had been sold, with expansions planned that would more than double the original number in five years. Construction of the club, with a swimming pool and putting green, was underway and an elementary school was planned on a 10-acre site that had been set aside.

Most exciting, work was continuing on the collection of shops and other businesses that would become North Star Mall – still a new concept in shopping and leisure time. In 1963, the new Loop 410 (covered here July 9, 2016) was about to become a better, faster connector.

After five years, an estimated 6,000 people lived in Harmony Hills, in households that averaged four people each. They had seen the future, and it worked for them.

The Harmony Hills Birthday Party will be held at 6:30 p.m., Sept. 23 at the neighborhood’s Cabana Club, 339 Fantasia Drive. The program will include a Memory Lane video presentation as well as proclamations from elected officials and a group photograph around the birthday cake.

Current and former residents are invited to share stories and photos with the neighborhood association at admin@ghhna.org or by contacting this column.

historycolumn@yahoo.com | Twitter: @sahistorycolumn | Facebook: SanAntoniohistorycolumn

TAXES

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\$140 billion in new taxes on oil and gas companies, will hit Texas harder than just about any other part of the country, he says.

“You only need four votes in the House to block these crippling tax hikes. Four of those votes are here in Texas, among Democrats who run for Congress as moderate, Main Street Democrats,” Brady said in an interview with Hearst Newspapers. “If the White House and Speaker Pelosi were coming for the auto industry, every lawmaker in Detroit would fight those tax hikes tooth and nail.”

Some Democrats are already starting to voice doubts about the spending package, even as party leaders press on.

Reps. Henry Cuellar of Laredo, Vicente Gonzalez of McAllen and Lizzie Fletcher of Houston signed a letter to House leadership raising concerns over some of the new tax provisions.

Rep. Stephanie Murphy, a Florida Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, said last week that she would vote against the bills moving through the committee, saying the process has been “too rushed, driven by politics rather than policy.”

Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat, has urged the party to “hit pause.”

Texas Democrats have not yet gone that far, pointing out that they have yet to see the text of the spending bills and still don’t know what will end up in the final package.

‘Targeting’ oil and gas

Fletcher said she and her staff have been in “a very constant dialogue” with Democrats on the Ways and Means Committee who are crafting the tax provisions.

“Rep. Brady hasn’t talked to me about it. If he had, he would know I have been working on these issues since this process began,” Fletcher said. “I cannot think of a day I haven’t been on the phone with my constituents



J. Scott Applewhite / Associated Press

U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, is a leading figure in Republicans’ effort to tank President Joe Biden’s budget that would raise taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

or my colleagues talking about some of the various proposed pay-fors that are floating around out there.”

In a statement, Gonzalez said there is “still a lot unknown about the package” and that this is a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to invest in our future and enhance the quality of life for millions of Americans.” But he also voiced some reservations about the taxes on oil and gas.

“While I am eager to work with leadership and the current administration to address the challenges of our changing climate, we must get this right,” Gonzalez said. “Targeting America’s energy industry will not only harm our energy independence and supply, but it will force us to turn to other countries’ dirtier, less efficient oil and gas. Let’s not forget in Texas alone, oil and gas supports over 2.5 million jobs, pro-

vides more than \$251 billion in wages and contributed more than \$411 billion to the state’s economy in 2019. We must not leave these workers behind.”

In 2020, Republicans had success in Texas warning of the damage Biden’s proposals would have on the oil and gas industry, holding off Democrats’ advances in an increasingly competitive state and even making surprise headway into long-blue districts in South Texas.

“The state is more purple than before, and Republicans like Congressman Brady are returning to bread-and-butter political issues to make sure Republicans can hold the line in 2022,” said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political scientist at the University of Houston. “Persuadable voters are moved by pocketbook issues, so talking about low taxes and protecting oil and gas jobs can shift

the needle for Republicans in suburban districts where they have struggled to maintain control.”

Environmental advocates, however, say the tax hikes are an important part of the package’s effort to shift America to clean energy, a move that a growing number of Texans support, in part because of how cities such as Houston have become prime examples of the effects of climate change.

Key for Biden’s energy goals

The spending package aims to meet Biden’s goals of generating 80 percent of electricity from clean energy and lowering greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2030.

“This would be by far the largest step any country and certainly the U.S. has taken to tackle climate change,” said Luke Metzger,

executive director of Environment Texas, an advocacy group based in Austin. “Global warming is causing both loss of life but also extreme harm to our economy – costing us billions of dollars in needing to repair destroyed homes and businesses, to harden defenses against extreme storms. Doing nothing is not an option. That’s going to cost billions or trillions of dollars to our economy.”

Polling suggests Texas voters are increasingly supportive of green energy. A January survey by the Hobby School of Public Affairs at the University of Houston found that Texans overwhelmingly favor expanding solar power plants (69 percent) and wind turbine farms (63 percent). A substantial number of respondents also wanted to reduce coal mining (50 percent) and fracking (42 percent). Just 19 percent and 27 percent favored expanding coal mining and fracking, respectively.

But Brady’s warnings about oil and gas are just a piece of the broader messaging on the costs of the spending package that Republicans he leads on the Ways and Means Committee have been pushing.

Biden has vowed not to raise taxes on families earning less than \$400,000, and Democrats have so far remained focused on raising taxes on the wealthy and corporations. But Brady says changes to other tax provisions could cost small businesses, farmers and others.

“He’s been highlighting to people who gets hurt, how many people get hurt – and that’s why you’re seeing Democrats begin to walk away,” Norquist said.

“Brady is obviously the leading edge of making that case,” said Frank Clemente, executive director of Americans for Tax Fairness, a progressive group pushing the spending bill. “He’s kind of relentless. ... He forces moderate Democrats who are afraid of the tax issue into a corner. It’s a big PR machine that he’s kind of the tip of the spear on.”

ben.wermund@chron.com