

Kempner Family Shapes Future of Masterplanned Communities in Sugar Land

Including excerpts from an interview with former Mayor Bill Little

The extension of the Southwest Freeway to Sugar Land cleared the way for the growth of residential development during the 1960s. The state's highway project extended the freeway through rice fields in Sharpstown to U.S. Highway 90A, a milestone that spurred the development of Sugar Creek and other areas.

"Sugar Land's unique development can be attributed to good decisions made by the Kempner family. After the Southwest Freeway service roads and the U.S. Highway 90A overpass had been built, the Kempners ' decided they wanted out of the land business to concentrate on the sugar business -- so they sold land.

Sugar Creek was developed after Jack Kamin ... *(the developer of the very successful Nassau Bay)* ... said to Harris Kempner, 'If you sell me some land, I will guarantee that the balance of your land will be increased in value.'"

Kamin and a member of the Kempner family reached an agreement for the acreage over coffee in a shop in Clear Lake. Terms were listed on a napkin that was signed, and they sealed the deal with a handshake. The new project was introduced to prospective buyers by Kamin's partner, Don Russell at the Houston Club in downtown Houston during 1969.

The Imperial Cattle Ranch sold about 1,200 acres to a developer to create

what became Sugar Creek in 1968. The area's first master-planned community introduced country club living near Sugar Land. It had the feel of rural estates with upscale amenities that included a Robert Trent Jones golf course.

Sugar Creek was a community that revolved around a golf course and a country club. The golf course was a new amenity for Sugar Land, but it also addressed flood concerns that were common in the county.

"Sugar Creek was developed, and true to Jack's work, the land's value increased considerably. No one ever thought that half million dollar houses would be built around Sugar Land!

The Kempners were next approached by the man who developed Pecan Grove. It was decided that the only fair way to sell the land was to put the property up for bid rather than negotiate with only one individual. Gerald Hines was the highest bidder on 9,500 acres that became First Colony and the Industrial Park.

In 1972, the Kempner family sold 7,500 acres to Gerald Hines Interests for the development of First Colony. It was one of the largest land sales in Texas history. Development began in 1977 by Sugarland Properties Inc. and would follow the next 30 years. The master-planned community offered homebuyers formal landscaping, neighborhoods segmented by price range, extensive greenbelts, a golf course and country club, lakes and boulevards, neighborhood amenities and shopping.

"Hines did a marvelous job with financing. He got the Ford Motor Credit Corporation to come in as a partner. After a period of years,

Ford decided they were really not in the land business, but in the automobile business. So Ford sold their interest to Royal Dutch Pension Plan.

The thing that makes Sugar Land so unusual is that one owner sold to one buyer. That buyer could then develop a master planned community. I don't know many places around the United States that have had that opportunity.

By that time, the city was well organized with a comprehensive plan and building codes. They imposed restrictions on the way Hines developed, put in his utilities and how he sold his bonds. The City had a financial advisor by the name of Ernest Brown, who had a lot of knowledge about municipal utility districts, utility systems and city oversight. He was a great help to the City and helped prevent a slipshod development. It all fit together hand-in-glove."

Article as seen in the Fort Bend Star

Money Magazine and CNNmoney.com rank Sugar Land as one of America's Best Places to Live.
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