



The Transformation of HCC-Central College: A Tribute to the Former San Jacinto High School

By **DR. WILLIAM HARMON, President, Central Campus, HCCD**



Houston's Midtown area, situated between Houston's thriving downtown and the city's world-class Texas Medical Center, is ripe with potential and about to undergo a major transformation.

The largest landholder in Midtown is the Central College campus of the Houston Community College (HCC)

District, which also has the largest international student enrollment of any community college system in the nation.

The Central Campus -the first in the HCC District, which will comprise nine campuses throughout Houston by year 2009- spans 16 city blocks in the core of Midtown and is built around the 1914 Junior High High School, renamed in 1926 San Jacinto Senior High School facility.

The campus, like the HCC District itself, is growing, requiring planning processes in new construction and renovation of existing facilities that will benefit students, faculty, the surrounding community, and the college environment.

The campus transformation is designed to accommodate future growth. Since 2004, enrollment at the college has increased from 10,000 to approximately 16,000 students. I believe an aesthetically pleasing campus will likely attract more students.

Aside from the physical transformation of the campus, we want to demonstrate to the residents of Midtown that the Central Campus is a vital and attractive community neighbor.

The plan includes the replacement of some parking lots with grass and shade trees. Additionally, all construction designed by the architects will follow Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Standards.

Because of its origin as a component of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the subsequent separation from HISD created Central College as the first HCC campus in 1971.

The HCC Central Campus has been evolving since 1979 when HCC began transforming San Jacinto High School building into its initial college campus.

With demand for space far exceeding the campus's capacity, plans were developed to accommodate future growth of the campus as well as an opportunity to preserve the historical perspectives of the San Jacinto site that would contribute to the revitalization of the immediate surrounding community.

The project is intended to serve as a prime example for Houston, whose business leaders and city planners are focused on attracting more growth to urban locations in order to preserve open space and to prevent haphazard urban development.

The physical transformation of the campus includes a partnership with the Midtown Redevelopment Authority to create an anchor for the campus, as well as for Midtown, and thereby establish an education landmark for the city.

The initial phase of construction started in January of 2007, with a schedule completion date in April of 2008.

The new HUB construction and green space is rooted in four key elements. They include the following:

- ◆ Contribution to academic learning;
- ◆ The image of the campus,
- ◆ Its potential as the focal point of Midtown, and
- ◆ The restoration of the historical San Jacinto High School grounds as it existed at its conception.

In partnership with the Houston based Llewellyn Davis Sahní Architectural firm, new construction began with analysis of the campus's land use, access, circulation, growth, and ground plane treatment factors that students, faculty, and community residents experience as they walk through the existing campus.

The next step involved the creation of a physical presence on the campus that would attract potential students as well as community residents to the campus. This led to more general questions of what are the characteristics of a great open space and what makes an attractive streetscape.

Considering as a practical matter, construction design and the international appeal of HCC, the partners drew inspiration from famed open spaces around the world: the piazza San Marco in Venice; the Spanish Steps in Rome; the Royal Crescent in Bath, England; and Bryant Park in New York City, among others.

Each served as an example of how best to exploit elements such as lighting, benches, ground plane treatment, and water to bring out the best in the design of the campus.

The final design for the campus's New Star Plaza, a space directly in front of the San Jacinto building, will complement its historical nature. The plaza, shaped to evoke the Lone Star of Texas, will be built around the existing scale replica of the San Jacinto Monument and will feature trees and greenery.

The high school's alumni, including such notables as Walter Cronkite, heart surgeon Dr. Denton Cooley, Alan Finger, Joe Jaworski, sister Claire Draper, and Joanie Moncrief, and two former Houston mayors, are helping raise \$4 million to fund the plaza work.

The overall transformation of the campus requires a major consideration for the redevelopment of routes in and around the campus community.

The Midtown Management District proposes to improve Caroline Street, the major thoroughfare connecting the Central Campus to downtown, and to the Medical Center.

It is envisioned that Caroline Street will serve as the ceremonial approach to the campus. The college is also considering the closing of sections of two major streets around the campus to create a seamless college community that enhances pedestrian movement.

The Star Plaza and street improvements will provide badly needed open space in the community and create equity for the college by stimulating neighborhood redevelopment.

Finally, establishing a destination for Houstonians, too, can only serve to bolster commerce in Midtown, contributing to the revitalization of the area, restoring the Campus to its former San Jacinto image, while serving the needs of the HCC District and its students. ◆