

***“Inspiring Exemplary Cultural Landscapes”***

## 2. City Image and Context

### 2.1 Introduction

Recreational needs, opportunities and enjoyment are shaped by a city’s particular image, physical characteristics, history, local economy and demographics. Image determines expectation and experience; physical features provide opportunities even as they occasionally impose constraints; both cultural and natural history instruct us to treat land with respect and stewardship; demographics determine needs; economy informs us as to the possibilities. It is thus fundamental to understand the particular image and context of the City of Keller in order to address the citizens’ needs for recreation, parks and open space.

This year, 2007, the **City of Keller** was named by *Money Magazine* as one of the **“100 Best Places to Live”**, which measures among other things: **sense of community, natural setting, congestion, jobs and housing affordability.**

As a major contributor to “livability”, which is an overall gauge of civic vitality, the park system plays a major role in shaping the City’s image. In perhaps an unexpected way, it is often the mundane and everyday features, both natural and man-made, that, when consciously treated in a celebratory manner, have the greatest impact on a community scale, taking people out of the vacuous “norm” by **creating a sense of place**. More and more, a variety of professions including health care, psychology, education and city planning recognizes the value of the presence of nature in the urban environment.



*The windmill feature recognizes Keller’s roots in agriculture as the source of income and well-being of the community in the past.*

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It is noticeable that Keller citizens emphasized a city image of rural character including trees and a pathway in the logo developed for the City. Such is the power of an image that it becomes the inspiration for image branding and community celebration. Recognition of Keller’s practically fixed, geographical boundaries further highlights this intense appreciation of nature.

***‘I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses tuned once more.’***

– John Burroughs,  
U.S. Naturalist and Essayist

### **2.2**

#### ***Image of the City of Keller***

The face of cities, or ***image***, is composed of natural and built physical features and their relationship to each other in a unique environment. Image, then, determines not only the visual character of the city, but also the way in which it is experienced by people. It is particularly the manner in which the parks and recreation system responds to such features - to respect, celebrate and protect - that enhances each part and elevates the quality of life of the community. The effective concept that **“the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”** is a comparable way of thinking in terms of the practical needs to benefits ratio.

The overall image of Keller’s parks and recreation system may be best characterized as dichotomous. Most of all, there is a considerable difference relative to the City geographically, north to south: there is more park land south of Keller Parkway, which is the area of the City that incorporated and developed later. Also, the number of parks available to residents is much greater in the south than in the north. This is apparent in the oldest residential neighborhood in northeast Keller where parks, trails, or other recreational amenities were not envisioned prior to being incorporated into the City of Keller. Unlike other more “connected” city areas, it also particularly lacks parks.

### **2.3**

#### ***Natural and Cultural Features***

##### ***Natural Vegetation***

The image and character of Keller is greatly defined by the presence of natural vegetation found throughout the City.

Keller lies within the ancient Cross Timbers ecosystem which is found from southeast Kansas, across Oklahoma and into central Texas. The Cross Timbers

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are characterized by drought-stressed woodlands, populated by low-stature, slow-growing and centuries-old post oaks (*Quercus stellata*). Many post oaks predate not only statehood, but also the birth of the United States. Two to four hundred year old post oaks survive in the Cross Timbers. In fact, post oak trees that average only 15" in trunk diameter at breast height and 30' tall are often in the 200- to 300-year age class. The oldest post oak tree ever found is only 20 feet tall, but careful tree-ring analysis indicates that it is over 400 years old. This tree is well and alive in the Keystone Ancient Forest Preserve at Sand Springs, Oklahoma. Red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) trees over 500 years old have also been found in the Cross Timbers ecosystem. Other dominant plant species include blackjack oak, cedar elm, hickory, osage orange, mesquite, bumelia, hawthorn and greenbriar.

The Cross Timbers are a complex mosaic of upland forest, savanna, and glade, which form the broad ecotone between the eastern deciduous forests and the grasslands of the southern Great Plains. The Cross Timbers ecosystem supports biodiversity, water quality, and a multitude of recreational opportunities.



*The dappled light filters through the canopy of the native stand of post oaks, (*Quercus stellata*), at Willis Coves Open Space.*

The Cross Timbers have been largely cleared for cultivation or grazing and today survives only in a fragmentary pattern. What is left is further threatened by land clearing, suburban development, and the increased production of wood chip mills.



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What is left in Keller of the ancient Cross Timbers is important to protect and preserve. Representative stands of the Cross Timbers need to be identified and protected, in anticipation for and in partnership with future development. It is strongly recommended that development is done sensitively, so that nature areas and open space are incorporated into the recreational experience of the citizens of Keller.

Data source on Cross Timbers Ecosystem:

<http://www.uark.edu/misc/xtimber/summary.html>; and

Texas Parks and Wildlife: Cross Timbers and Prairies Ecological Region: [http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/land/habitats/cross\\_timbers/ecoregions/cross\\_timbers.phtml](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/land/habitats/cross_timbers/ecoregions/cross_timbers.phtml)

***Creeks and drainage ways***

Another set of elements that is an essential part of the City of Keller is its system of creeks and drainage ways. Creeks are probably the most important natural feature in the North Central Texas landscape. The quality of our drinking water as well as the quantity available for use is dependent on the protection of creeks. Their linearity establishes wildlife linkages between ecological refuge areas. Their tree-lined floodplains create beautiful views and vistas. Already realized by Keller, their linear character makes them ideal for trail linkages and access to natural areas.



*The easy meandering of Big Bear Creek and shady banks attracts visitors from Keller and surrounding cities.*

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***Rural Landscapes and Natural Areas***

Agricultural activity and natural areas are part of the history and rich character of Keller. Rural landscape, including wilderness as part of the natural, rural character, is disappearing. Keller should claim stewardship of its natural resources and mandate the importance of conscientious development. Through Keller’s parks system, visionary leadership shows to the world its values or “true colors”. In perhaps the primary medium of the City, the parks system is the canvas on which to showcase the rich composition of naturally wild, native diversity of vegetation. Set within the “civilized”, manicured park areas that typically serve as “programmed space”, the contrast is not only complementary, but also educational.

***‘Spending time in nature doesn’t waste time...it amplifies it.’***  
– Richard Louv.  
Journalist and Author

As is too often the case in many cities, the rural quality of the City of Keller is lost on a daily basis through traditional development. Preserving the enduringly unique character of a landscape adds identity and value – financially and aesthetically. It is incumbent upon City leaders to shepherd development to ensure that today’s as well as future generations benefit from it. Rural landscapes and natural areas are fast vanishing from the urban environment.



*The horse grazing in lush pasture land and mature trees in the background creates a sense of calm that uplifts spirits and is a positive feature in the City.*



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Proactive regulations regarding development help “re-educate” developers about the efforts they make, but don’t quite understand: saving trees and irrigation of native plants, to name two examples. Some development appears to make an attempt to keep the largest trees; however, without due consideration to the root zone by cutting and filling outside the drip line, even “saved” trees will be gone within a short period of time. In addition, native trees die when subjected to unaccustomed irrigation water.



*The high ridge of land in the background outlines a rural horizon line in the City of Keller. Every effort possible should be made to prevent the destruction of this and similar high areas in the City. Rather than continuing to allow razing of land in typical development, such as this in the northwest corner of Keller, the City should adopt strong ordinances which aim to preserve the unique, natural character of the land recognized in the tool of conservation development.*

Across the nation, there is wide interest among city officials to preserve natural and rural character. The common misconception is that rural quality is maintained by low-density development: i.e.: large lots, 1 and 2 acres in size. The reality is that such measures only result in the same grid of bland uniformity. Such a system destroys the very elements and features that contribute to the charm of a rural landscape. However, when rural landscapes are offset by sensitive development, their real beauty is revealed. Very good models for such land development exist. Randall Arendt, one of the foremost conservation thinkers, understands well the lasting health benefits, community value and economic benefits of such an approach. More detailed information may be found at [http://www.landchoices.org/conservation\\_design.htm](http://www.landchoices.org/conservation_design.htm)

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### **Cultural Landscapes**

Cultural landscapes are places imbued with a sense of culture, natural and human history, people and events. In addition to the park land encompassed in the park system today, examples of cultural landscapes are various. They range from early structures, such as in the Old Town Keller District, Bourland and Mount Gilead Cemeteries, to agrarian and rural open space landscapes, to the dramatic topography of the future Northeast Park, as well as to creeks, greenwalks, trails and treelined streets. Such places should be celebrated and cultivated, augmented by careful planning and inspired design.

### **Conservation Development**

Conservation Development calls for studying and celebrating the quality of open space and preserves, establishing the most appropriate natural preserve configuration and the development of a network of functional connections.

The best manner in which the rural character of the land can be preserved is through conservation development, the antidote to “bland”, look-alike city neighborhoods. It dedicates large areas (50-70% of the entire project development area) to communal open space with the rest (30 – 50%) available for smaller size residential lots. This approach preserves the integrity of the land, protecting unique features as open space and trail connections, which in turn increases the economic value of the built property. Contrary to traditional developers’ thinking, these smaller lot residential areas can command up to 23% greater economic value than larger lot size houses in a traditional development. The concept is similar to a golf estate development whereby the integrity and functionality of the golf course is secured *first*, and the residential development occurs around the golf course, *secondarily*. The rural character becomes a communal “jewel” of the neighborhood, with natural open space containing unique features and vistas in place of the golf course.

A number of very good models exist demonstrating land development strategies that add value, beauty and integrated connectivity to the natural environment in communities. Randall Arendt, one of the foremost conservation thinkers, understands well the lasting health benefits, community value and economic benefits of such an approach. **Appendix F: Context Sensitive Design: A Case for Conservation Planning and Design** provides additional information.

See also: [http://www.landchoices.org/conservation\\_design.htm](http://www.landchoices.org/conservation_design.htm)

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***Topography***

Another landscape element that adds to the image of the City of Keller is the topography change within the City. Though the North Texas landscape is generally flat, it contains topographical changes which surprise and delight. Such land forms present opportunities to celebrate their unique character with parks, open spaces and overlooks to be enjoyed and experienced by everyone. It is noticeable that no park in Keller is found on higher elevations.

There is an opportunity to correct this with a look-out point at the base of the water tower between Whitley Road and Shady Lane North, along the TXU easement. The water tower’s adjacency to this easement presents the opportunity to become a unique destination point in the City’s park system. From atop this high point, the vantage at the base of the water tower affords views in all directions, surrounded as it is by residential neighborhoods. The presence of the utility easement further calls for trail connections. Other opportunities for the celebration of topography lie in the undeveloped section of the City, where it is crucial to protect the high areas and therefore the natural skyline of the City.



*The prominent location of a water tower on a high elevation within the City provides an opportunity to celebrate views to the surrounding landscape.*

***Contemporary Elements and Public Art***

Contemporary elements that contribute to the image of Keller include the architecture of The Keller Pointe and Town Hall. Other landmarks of contemporary life include water towers, whose distinct forms and height serve to announce Keller and its image of trees and countryside as seen in the City logo. The power of public art lies in its quality as a singular form of recreational experience, the unique dialogue that it initiates with each individual; the



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educational value through contemplation and its power to inspire and delight. Public art is considered an important element in defining the image of Keller.



*The sleek and serene architecture of the Town Hall melds with the landscape as it reflects the sky.*



*The presence of water towers in Keller is prominent due to their size and visibility from afar.*

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*Modern, organic streamlined sculpture enhances the entry of The Keller Pointe.*

***Roads and streetscape***

The image of the City is further defined by the major thoroughfares that transect the City. For some visitors, these major roads are the only manner in which they experience or view the City of Keller. Pleasing views from these roads to the surrounding landscape, as well as roadside treatments and the marking of major intersections, are all contributors to the image to Keller.

It is apparent that the City of Keller takes pride in its image through a concerted effort to ensure tree lined roads with wide sidewalks and wide parkways (land between sidewalk and roadside curb). Country roads establish character in themselves with open swales adjacent to narrow roads where trees create shaded and welcoming “tunnels” of branches and greenery. Such is the power of landscapes as these that they may well be designated with appropriate signage as having scenic status: like “mini by-ways” within the city.



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*This tree-lined street creates a relaxing space: trees and vegetation make a containing edge as the roadway and trail curve around.*



*The narrow road allows for “tree canyons” that are shady and welcoming. Where topographic change occurs, interesting views and vistas are created.*

**Gateways**

Gateways are an important feature in a community, and nowhere more important than in the public domain. Keller can do much more for its image with careful design and planning of this type of feature.



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*The gateway to the Keller Town Center complex is at a human scale that is inviting and welcoming.*



*The gateway entry to the trail at this neighborhood gives a sense of identity and character that enhances the users' experience.*



*Understood by developers, private residential developments create an impact with distinctive gateways.*

In the approach to the City, there exist workable opportunities to celebrate arrival at significant zones, areas and places.

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***Historic “Old Town Keller”***

True to its early beginnings, springing up along the railway, the oldest buildings in Keller line the railway, west of Main Street. The Keller Historic Overlay District is a narrow swath of land along Main Street at the city’s western edge. It is bounded to the north by Johnson Road, along the east irregularly backing up to residential neighborhoods, to the south along Bear Creek Parkway and to the west by its historic impetus, the railroad.

The historic “Old Town” district includes a cluster of colorful shops and restaurants which contribute to an understanding and appreciation of the City’s roots. The shops and buildings in this area are charming and attractive, with a character that conveys a time of calm and stable, purposeful growth. There is great exposure and visibility along the major Main Street frontage.



*The best way to celebrate and protect the character of a historic street and adjacent buildings, is to make it a destination rather than a thoroughfare.*



*An historic Burlington Northern Railroad locomotive is on display. Rail lines parallel Main Street in “Old Town Keller”, in the Keller Historic Overlay District.*