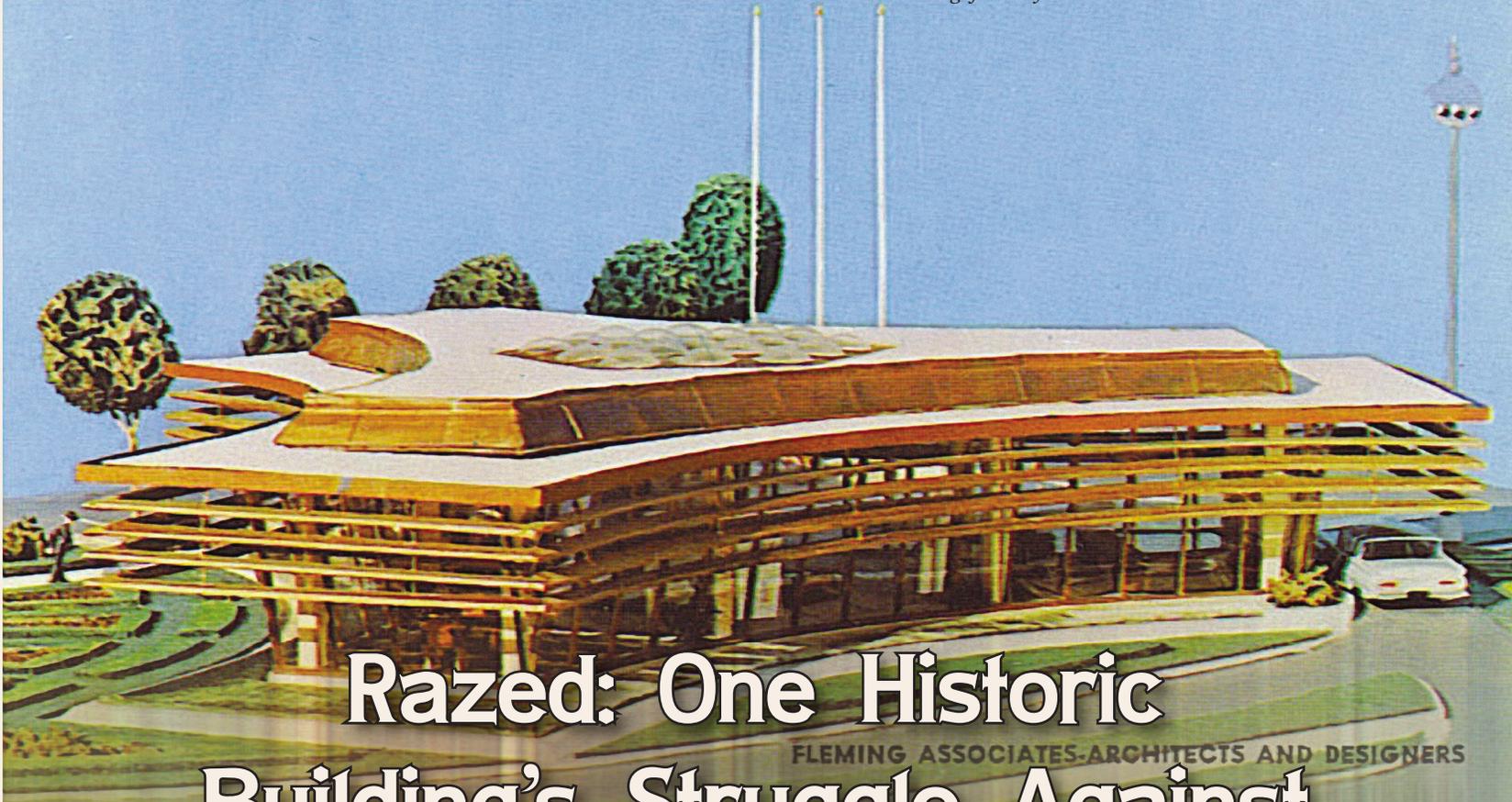


Illustration of original Southwestern Savings Association Building, formerly located at 5301 Bissonnet.



Razed: One Historic Building's Struggle Against Modern Development

by Katy Oliveira

Newly constructed Amegy Bank Building, formerly the Southwest Bank of Texas, currently located at 5301 Bissonnet.
PHOTO: KATY OLIVEIRA



KATY OLIVEIRA EARNED HER BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY FROM BAYLOR UNIVERSITY AND HER MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON. SHE CURRENTLY RESIDES IN AUSTIN, WHERE SHE WORKS AS AN ACADEMIC COUNSELOR AT ST. EDWARD'S UNIVERSITY.

The recent demolition of the northeast corner of the River Oaks Shopping Center coupled with the potential demolition of two beloved Houston landmarks, The River Oaks Theater and the Alabama Theater, have sparked broad concern about historical preservation in Houston. The final fate of the two remaining 1930s era Art Deco buildings is still up for grabs, but many Houstonians are enthusiastically resisting their demise.

Traditionally, the majority of Houstonians have not been overwhelmingly concerned with matters of historic preservation, but the recent threat of razing these familiar landmarks has inspired many in the community to reconsider Houston's approach to preserving its history. Similar battles have been fought and lost over the preservation of Houston's historical buildings.

One unique Art Deco structure, the Southwestern Savings Association Building, was just such a casualty. Despite efforts by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, the Southwestern Savings Association Building was razed suddenly in the fall of 2004 to make room for a more spacious banking facility.

The survival of historic buildings often depends more on the time, money, and emotional attachment of a community to a building rather than its historical significance. The question: "Is this worth saving?" arose in regard to Bellaire's Southwestern Savings Association Building. Despite Bellaire's interest in its own rich history and penchant for historical preservation, citizen groups lost the fight to preserve the Southwestern Savings Association Building.

The City of Bellaire remains tucked away within the constantly advancing urban sprawl of Houston. The city was founded around the turn of the twentieth-century by William Wright Baldwin, an entrepreneur and vice president of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad who



Front Entrance, Southwestern Savings Association Building.
COURTESY: JEFF MILLS

came to Houston seeking investment opportunities.¹ In 1902, Baldwin created the South End Land Company and began to develop Houston's first residential suburb, the Westmoreland Addition, located just south of Buffalo Bayou. The investment was so successful that Baldwin began searching for other tracts of land to develop.²

In 1908, Baldwin purchased the Rice Ranch, part of the vast land holdings owned by William Marsh Rice, founder of the Rice Institute (now Rice University). The South End Land

Company subdivided the 9,700-acre ranch and used 3,000 acres of the land to develop the Westmoreland Farms. Baldwin intended to create a planned community of quiet homes without city congestion but with access to the city's commercial and cultural amenities.³

The company published brochures and maps advertising the development and town site throughout the eastern United States.⁴ An advertisement in the *Houston Daily Post* described Westmoreland Farms as a "unique suburban agricultural development."



Lobby, Southwestern Savings Association Building.

COURTESY: JEFF MILLS

The success of the development hinged on marketing that appealed to the popularization of “utopian” communities among middle-class city dwellers who were tired of poor urban living conditions.⁵ An earlier brochure even described the town name saying: “The town is Bellaire (fine air), for Westmoreland Farms is fanned day and night by the cooling breezes from the Gulf of Mexico.”⁶ That, however, is not where the name came from. Baldwin named the town

after Bellaire, Ohio, one of the stops served by his railroad company.

Baldwin marketed the fertile, treeless land to prospective residents by touting its various amenities. One advertisement described the town as: “Westmoreland Farms, where you will find shelled streets, a perfect drainage system, a very fine quality of soil, extensive ornamental and experimental plantings, together with many other improvements and advantages, tending to make it an attractive place for a suburban home.”⁷ Although the prairie

was ideal for farming, Baldwin had to find a way for his development to combat the region’s tendency to flood. The South End Land Company hired an experienced engineer who had developed levies for the Mississippi River to develop drainage ditches.⁸ Baldwin also promised and developed modern amenities such as electricity, water, telephones and transportation. The most critical amenity to the development’s success, however, was a transportation system which provided easy access to and from Houston.

Bellaire was accessible for automobiles only by way of old Richmond Road (now Bissonnet), the main thoroughfare of the city.⁹ To enhance access to Houston, Baldwin utilized his experience developing rail lines and created his own streetcar line. At the time, Houston’s city limits ended at what is now Herman Park and Rice University, more than ten miles away from Bellaire. Baldwin created the Westmoreland Railroad Company and built a streetcar line which ran along Bellaire Boulevard and ended at Houston’s South Main Street.¹⁰ The trolley service began running on December 28, 1910. Soon after, Baldwin constructed the Bellaire Station to shelter passengers while they waited for the trolley. The station was a large open-air pavilion located in the town’s center at Paseo Park. The pavilion also served as a popular venue for social events held by the community.¹¹ The trolley functioned as a vital line of transportation to and from the city of Houston for many years. The rainy weather conditions of the region, however, often caused tracks to sink and streetcars to derail. The expense of maintaining the line prompted the city to end service on September 26, 1927. The next day, bus service to Houston replaced streetcar service.¹²

The city of Bellaire was officially incorporated in 1918, however, Bellaire had been perceived as a separate municipality from its inception. In 1910, the first homes were built and the first businesses established. Teas Nursery, the first business in

Bellaire, was established in 1908. Many other businesses soon followed, including a two-story merchandising building, a hotel, and general store.

Like many other American cities, Bellaire experienced a spike in its growth after World War II. The city was transformed by a construction boom that almost doubled its 3,156 homes by 1960. The sudden population growth and the emergence of the widespread use of the automobile also required the construction of more highway and street systems.¹³

One of the most influential events to take place in the recent history of Bellaire was the construction of Loop 610, which began in 1962 and ended in 1968. The highway cut Bellaire into eastern and western portions, caused the loss of 250 homes, altered traffic patterns around the city, and changed the physical, social and economic conditions of the city. Some saw the construction of Loop 610 as a great opportunity for the growth and improvement of Bellaire. Between 1974 and 1976 the Texaco Building, Prudential Complex, the Sun Building, the St. Paul Building, the Northern Gas Building and 5909 West Loop South Building were all constructed. The construction of the highway and the commercial growth that accompanied it, however, alarmed many of Bellaire's residents. The continuous proposal of commercial construction caused many residents to fear the disruption of their quiet neighborhoods.¹⁴

Over the course of its short history, the city of Bellaire has struggled to preserve its identity as a city of houses against developers, expansion, and annexation by neighboring cities such as Houston and West University. The residents of Bellaire have utilized zoning ordinances as one strategy to preserve the residential integrity of the city. In 1939, the city of Bellaire passed its first zoning ordinance. By this time Houston had expanded and Bellaire was no longer ten miles away. The ordinance protected the small community's residential neighborhoods

from the commercial construction of the cities it neighbored.¹⁵

Most of Bellaire's political movements and highly contested elections have centered on zoning and rezoning disputes. In 1950, residents passed the first zoning ordinance that affected the entire city in an attempt to constrain the proposed expansion of business in the area.¹⁶ The construction of Loop 610, the expansion of Houston, and an increase in high rise and commercial development made land use a hotly contested issue. In the fall of 1977, residents who opposed the increase of commercial development aligned with the Bellaire Civic Action Club and implemented a recall of the mayor and three members of the Bellaire City Council.¹⁷ The many controversies over Bellaire's identity as a residential neighborhood led the Bellaire City Council to enlist the University of Houston's School of Architecture to prepare a planning study for the city.¹⁸

Preserving Bellaire's identity as a city of houses is a value that has been passed down by the residents of Bellaire for most of its history. The citizens have often committed to honoring and preserving artifacts

and histories they deem important to their heritage. The community of Bellaire has set several precedents for preserving its history. In 1969, the Bellaire Women's Civic Club created a historical cookbook to commemorate Bellaire's 50th Anniversary. The members of the Civic Club collected historical materials from Bellaire's early settlers by way of interviews and research. With this information the members of the organization created a text that not only preserves part of Bellaire's history, but also preserves treasured recipes of some of Bellaire's residents.¹⁹ The book has become a heavily utilized source for historical information regarding Bellaire.

The community of Bellaire began an effort to commemorate its early transportation by refurbishing and replicating the original trolley service that ran between Houston and Bellaire. In 1986, San Jacinto Savings donated a \$15,000 grant to the Bellaire Sesquicentennial Commission to refurbish the trolley and beautify the surrounding area, Paseo Park. Bellaire no longer possessed the original trolley, but wanted to find a replacement that resembled the original car. After a worldwide search for a trolley car, the



Southwestern Savings Association Building formerly located at 5301 Bissonnet.

COURTESY: JEFF MILLS

Bellaire Sesquicentennial Commission purchased a car, similar to the original, which had been running in Lisbon, Portugal. The trolley is now maintained by the Bellaire Historical Society. Many residents and local historians believe the trolley is responsible for Bellaire's existence. They believe the access to and from Houston provided by the trolley was instrumental to Bellaire's success as a budding town site.

The Paseo Park area surrounding the refurbished trolley has been the site of many other projects of the Bellaire Historical Society. In 1995, the society proposed to the Bellaire City Council the restoration of the original pavilion, which served as a streetcar station. The society hoped to re-establish the pavilion to one of its other original uses, a community gathering place in the park. City Council quickly approved the Bellaire Historical Society's plan outlining the structure's historical significance and proposing the reconstruction of the pavilion to its original 1911 design.²⁰

Over the years the pavilion had been used for other purposes; after the trolley line ceased operations, it was used as a bus stop for a short time. It then became neglected and soon fell

into disrepair. In the 1940s the Bellaire Lion's Club repaired and enclosed the structure to use as a meeting place. During the planning phase of the restoration, the Bellaire Historical Society had to determine what the original structure looked like. Luckily the Lion's Club enclosed the original structure by building around the pavilion, inadvertently preserving some of the original structure. This was very fortunate because no original plans or architectural records exist that describe the original pavilion. The society decided that the best way to refurbish the structure would be to demolish it and reuse salvageable materials. The remnants of the structure as well as photos found in the *Historical Cookbook* provided much of the architectural information needed to reconstruct the pavilion with historical accuracy.²¹

The project managers took special care to reconstruct the pavilion with historical integrity. They sought to match the original materials used to construct the building with currently available materials. They also submitted plans and drawings to the Texas Historical Commission, provided informal reviews of the plans for the society. Work on the reconstruction

project began by dismantling the existing structure in early 1997. The project was completed two years later and the new pavilion was formally dedicated on September 9, 2000. The restoration project was largely funded by donations from local businesses and residents. The trolley car and pavilion provide links to Bellaire's past by serving as reminders of Bellaire's history and heritage. Many residents believe that the streetcar and the pavilion allowed Bellaire to survive the expansion of Houston. The protection of Bellaire's identity and independence may have been lost without a strong infrastructure. This sentiment provided the Bellaire Historical Society with the community support it required to successfully complete the trolley and pavilion restoration projects.²²

The community of Bellaire also strives to preserve its past by placing historical markers throughout the community. Paseo Park alone has two historical markers. One marker near the trolley and pavilion commemorates the story and legacy of the streetcar service. The other commemorates the capture of Mexican dispatches by Deaf Smith on April 18, 1836. The Bellaire Historical Society submitted an application to the Texas Historical Commission for placement of a marker commemorating this event, which occurred somewhere in what is now Bellaire. According to the application, the campaign marked a turning point in the Texas Revolution. Deaf Smith and his scouts captured a Mexican courier and Miguel Bachiller, who had been with Santa Anna just a few days earlier. The capture provided vital intelligence to Smith. The prisoners revealed that Sam Houston's forces outnumbered Santa Anna, providing Houston with the opportunity and confidence to prepare for battle against the Mexican Army. The Bellaire Historical Society believes that this event was a significant part of Texas's success in the revolution, making it worth commemorating.²³

In these examples, historical preservation was contingent upon saving memories and artifacts that



Refurbished trolley car located in Bellaire's Paseo Park.

PHOTO: KATY OLIVEIRA

link Bellaire to its foundation and survival as a community. The historical significance of the Southwestern Savings Association building, however, was largely rooted in its architectural style and the prominence of the architect, C.C. "Pat" Fleming.²⁴ Although he at times worked as an architect, Fleming is best known in Houston as a prominent landscape architect.

Cauthen Cook Fleming²⁵ was born on February 13, 1909, in Beaumont, Texas. When Fleming was nine years old his family moved to Arizona to escape the humid climate of south Texas. Ten years later, Fleming returned to Texas to study architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. An accident while welding a project at school, however, burned his eyes, forcing Fleming to stop his studies at the University. His father then arranged a guided trip to Europe for him to view architecture. While in Europe, Fleming discovered that he preferred the setting and surroundings of the buildings more than the actual buildings. His trip to Europe sparked a love of landscape architecture. Fleming never finished his degree in architecture, but instead pursued a career as a landscape architect, without any formal training or education.²⁶

Fleming began his career under Mrs. C. B. Whitehead in Austin. His first job was a planting assignment at the University of Texas. Fleming traveled across Texas and Oklahoma in pursuit of plants for the project. After completing the University of Texas job, Fleming went to work for the National Park Service as a junior-grade landscape architect charged with designing the Palmetto State Park near Gonzales, Texas. His next assignment with the Park Service was to supervise the planning and development of the San Jacinto Monument and Battleground. This high profile job gained Fleming recognition from prominent Houstonians, leading to his appointment as the assistant director of the Houston Housing Authority.²⁷

In the late 1930s, Fleming formed a professional landscape planning practice with his colleague Albert Sheppard. The most notable commission they received was the Diana Garden for Miss Ima Hogg at her home, Bayou Bend. Fleming's partnership with Sheppard lasted until World War II, when Sheppard went to work for Brown and Root. Fleming then served as the first director of Houston's Department of Parks and Recreation, drawing up the plans for major improvements to Hermann Park, including the Natural Science Museum, Miller Outdoor Theater and the Zoo.²⁸ After the Second World War, Fleming went on to establish an architecture firm, Fleming Planning Associates, which designed and built the Southwestern Savings Building.

Fleming was also heavily involved in the preservation of Houston's history. He was one of the founders in 1954 of the Harris County Heritage Society, an organization established to promote awareness of Houston's history and preserve its architectural heritage. Fleming also advocated the transformation of Buffalo Bayou into a park and recreational facility. He donated a design to the city of Houston which included trails, boating facilities, and restaurants. His dream was never realized due to lack of funding. C.C. Fleming worked to preserve and develop significant historical, cultural, and public sites all over the Houston area, until his death on February 6, 1996.²⁹

Ironically, Fleming's Southwestern Savings Association Building did not withstand the controversy over its preservation. This modern style building originally housed the Southwestern Savings Association after opening its doors on May 1, 1962.³⁰ After being renovated over the years, the building was featured in the 1990 edition of the Houston Architectural Guide. The text notes that the building was a "unique boomerang-shaped pavilion, faced with canted panes of glass and a dropped horizontal grill to shield it from the sun."³¹ The leader of the preservation effort, Jeff Mills,



C.C. "Pat" Fleming COURTESY: JEFF MILLS

cited the building's unique design as the chief reason for preservation. Mills stated, "This sort of modern style, almost like 'The Jetsons' style,' it said really to people who saw it, that anything was possible." He added, "And I think we really owe to the quality of life in Bellaire to give this building an even shot before it's gone and will never return."³²

In December 2003, the Southwest Bank of Texas purchased the property, which included the Southwestern Savings Association Building as well as a strip-center.³³ The bank submitted a request for an amendment to the Planning and Zoning Regulations, Article IX. They required the amendment so they could acquire the proper zoning needed to construct and operate a four-lane drive through banking facility on the site. A notice of a public hearing was published in the *Southwest News* and was also mailed to any property owners located within 200 feet of the location. A public hearing regarding the request for a specific use amendment was held on July 14, 2004.³⁴

Representatives of the Southwest Bank of Texas, Benito Guerrier of Kirksey Architects, and Doug Demiano, a Senior Vice President of Southwest Bank of Texas Corporate Real Estate, presented the bank's application for the amendment. The bank required the amendment because



Art Deco Architectural detail of Southwestern Savings Association Building.
COURTESY: JEFF MILLS



it planned to construct a new two-story 8,000 square foot banking facility. Benito Guerrier assured the council that the plans would enhance the entire intersection by closing some of the existing driveways that line Bissonnet to improve the flow of traffic. He also suggested that the landscaping along the intersection be improved.³⁵

Guerrier then described the reasons why the bank had decided not to renovate the existing Southwestern Savings Association Building. During the assessment of the building, the inspector found one foot of standing water in the basement. The standing water had seeped into the walls causing severe cracks, structural damage, and mold infestation. The building had been neglected and abandoned for more than seven years. In addition, the bank felt that the existing drive-through was too small for large vehicles. Furthermore, the previous owners could not locate the plans for the existing structure. All of these factors led the bank to decide that the most efficient solution was to construct a new facility rather than renovate. The council then heard from the city Planning and Zoning Commission, which held a public hearing on the issue on June 8, 2004. After reviewing the plans and asking a

few question concerning the expected number of drive-through customers, the commission recommended the amendment be granted. It felt that a new banking facility would have little negative impact on the area.

The floor was then opened to citizens. Jeff Mills, a resident of Bellaire and leader of the preservation efforts, addressed the council. He requested that the final deliberation on the issue be postponed at least thirty days, allowing more time to assemble a case for adaptive reuse of the structure. He hoped that a compromise might be reached in order to save the building. Mills told the council that the building was a significant historical site because it had been designed by the prominent architect C. C. Fleming. He noted that the existing building was a “very unique example of early 1960s modern style of architecture and was quite rare in the United States. It was one of a kind in Bellaire.”³⁶

Mills admitted that restoration of the building would be an expensive endeavor, but reminded the council that people successfully carry out renovations all of the time. He also suggested that the bank utilize the preservation of the building as an opportunity to build goodwill and positive public relations within the

community of Bellaire. Mills argued that he had witnessed much more difficult projects achieve success, despite obstacles such as structural damage, water damage, and mold infestation.

Next, Daphne Scarborough, a representative of the Greater Houston Area for the Preservation of 1960s Era Buildings, addressed the council. She stressed that the building’s architectural style was unique and that adaptive reuse should be seriously considered. She also offered the services of her organizations to provide education, research, and help with any adaptive reuse planning.

Ramona Davis, Executive Director of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, also addressed the city council. She provided background information on the historical significance of the building. She also mentioned C. C. Fleming’s significant contributions to



Renovated Pavilion located in Bellaire's Paseo undergoing maintenance in 2007.

PHOTO: KATY OLIVEIRA

Houston. Finally, she stressed the unique style and its perfect accommodation to the unique shape of its location.

In the spirit of preserving the integrity of Bellaire's neighborhoods most residents who attended the hearing opposed the new bank construction because it might cause an increase in the flow of traffic. One resident, Jeff Canady, expressed concerns about the quality of life on Linden Street, the residential street located behind the bank. He was under the impression from the evening's discussion that the new bank would direct traffic flow from the drive-through to Linden Street. He suggested that the exit to the street be blocked off in order to preserve the safety and quality of life in the neighborhood. Another resident, David Hudnall, presented the council with a petition signed by the residents of Linden Street. The petition aired the neighborhood's concerns that the construction of a new bank would increase traffic flow. None of the citizens objected to the new facility based on concerns over the preservation of the existing structure. In fact many stated that they would support the facility if the exit to Linden Street was blocked.

Once all those who had signed up to speak had been heard, the meeting was adjourned. Despite Jeff Mills' request for an extension, the final deliberation on the amendment took place on Monday, August 2, 2004. During that meeting the Bellaire City Council unanimously approved the motion to grant the Specific Use Amendment and Permit to the Southwest Bank of Texas.³⁷

Despite the efforts of Jeffrey Mills and the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, the former Southwestern Savings Association building was demolished just a few months after the deliberation. Some of Mills' efforts included the construction of a website used to educate the public about the significance of the building, as well as an adaptive reuse plan. Architect Stephen Klimas provided to Mills a conceptual drawing, which expanded the existing structure to 5,000 square feet, maintained the architectural style, and included new drive-through lanes.³⁸

After the meeting, Bellaire's Mayor Cindy Siegal said "the action was not a decision by the city to demolish an 'architecturally significant' building." According to Siegal, city zoning ordinances were not designed to

address 'aesthetic merits' or 'historic protection' of private property. Instead, she contended that zoning was designed to reduce potential negative impacts on "health, safety, or public welfare." The City Council decided that the new Southwest Bank of Texas Complex would not have adverse effects on the surrounding neighborhoods.³⁹ Bellaire City Councilman Pat McLaughlan believed that preservation was not a high priority in Houston. According to McLaughlan, "if St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel had been built in downtown Houston, we would have demolished them by now to build a sports arena."⁴⁰

The Southwestern Savings Association building's significant architecture and connection to a prominent Houston landscape architect did not persuade the community of Bellaire and the Southwest Bank of Texas to preserve this historical structure. It seems that community concern is central to the successful preservation of historical sites. The majority of concerns and complaints regarding the preservation of the building originated from historians, preservationists, and architects. The other faction opposed the design of the new bank building; they did not necessarily support the preservation of the existing building. This faction's chief concern was the impact the new structure would have on their community. This response was consistent with Bellaire's legacy of protecting its identity as a city of houses. In Bellaire, primacy is given to the preservation of neighborhoods and communities. Many members of the community supported the construction of a new, more aesthetically pleasing bank building as long as the exit into the residential area was blocked. This support left little compelling opposition to the demolition of the old bank building. ★