

# Oak Cliff woman secures historic designation in bid to save 175-year-old West Dallas tree



Alexander Troup, whose research documented the history of the West Dallas Gateway Pecan Tree, and Katherine Homan, who as board president of the Fort Worth Avenue Development Group led the effort, sit in front of the 175-year-old tree Thursday. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

By [Sharon Grigsby](#)

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With gnarly, twisted branches, deep scars and misshapen canopy, it's hardly Dallas' most majestic pecan tree. But as the aging guardian of the Trinity River for the last 175 years, what an incredible history this pecan has witnessed, endured and miraculously survived.

The West Dallas Gateway Pecan Tree, at the southeast corner of Beckley Avenue and the Commerce Street Bridge, will finally get its due Friday with official recognition by the Texas Historic Tree Coalition. It is now listed in the state registry as a living legend.

Just steps from the Trinity Skyline Trail and Overlook Park, this old-timer has lived through generations of river flooding and road work only to now be boxed in by exploding apartment construction and threats of levee machinery. Luckily for the pecan tree, another local force of nature stood up for it: Neighborhood advocate Katherine Homan, an Oak Cliff resident whose tireless energy has never met a wrong she wasn't determined to right.

Homan, board president of the [Fort Worth Avenue Development Group](#), which pursued the proclamation on behalf of the city, wants you to believe she's been nothing more than the paper pusher in this crusade. She credits self-taught historian and urban archaeologist Alexander Troup, whose research provided the needed documentation. Homan also points to fellow Oak Cliff resident and planner Don Raines. Without his reworking of the Commerce-Beckley intersection, the West Dallas Gateway Pecan Tree wouldn't be here to honor.



The 175-year-old West Dallas Gateway Pecan Tree, which is located on Beckley Avenue just south of the Commerce Street Bridge. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

**“This is the anchor tree not just for Fort Worth Avenue, but for all of West Dallas, which has lost so much of its history,” Homan said. The pecan served in its earliest days as an important waypoint marking the route from central Dallas across the Trinity River to places south and west. Bison hunters and cowboys driving cattle on the Shawnee Trail used the tree to locate the nearby low water crossing. When the first Commerce Street Bridge was built in 1855, the tree already rose tall at its western end.**

German immigrant Carl Wilhelm Heppner, who became a U.S. citizen in 1889, settled in West Dallas before the turn of the century and bought property that included the pecan tree. He built a three-story boathouse and pier there in 1906 and operated a ferry service across the Trinity River, an inefficient but affordable way for West Dallas farmers to get their produce to the other side for sale. A bit of an eccentric, Heppner also dredged the river bottom during those ferry crossings to pull up items for his junkyard. Heppner was nicknamed Noah of the Trinity after the huge 1908 flood because of the many lives he saved and livestock he rescued. Many also considered him the unofficial mayor of West Dallas because of his advocacy for channeling the river and building levees to protect both downtown and West Dallas. Among Troup's research on Heppner is a 1930 front page from the *Dallas Times Herald* headlined, "C.W. Heppner awaits next deluge in modern ark. Signs on his boathouse explain how he would control river." Heppner died six years later; his boathouse was demolished to do the levee work for which he had long advocated.

As waves of Mexican immigrants followed the earlier European ones to West Dallas, the gateway pecan tree continued to hold its own — until about a dozen years ago when it faced a serious death threat in the name of so-called progress. Plans presented at a 2009 community meeting for redesigning the Commerce-Beckley intersection, just east of where Fort Worth Avenue begins, were met with huge opposition from neighbors who wanted pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. Amid the many loud criticisms, Homan recalled, a small voice piped up with an entirely different question: "*Will the pecan tree be cut down? Isn't that what this plan shows?*"

Homan didn't know the woman who came to the defense of the tree. But she quickly took up the preservation cause. Not long after that community meeting, new planners created a design that took into account what neighbors wanted and also attempted to save the much-loved pecan. The second proposal, overseen by Raines, now a senior planner at Dallas City Hall, did everything possible to avoid damaging the pecan's roots, only 18 inches below the surface, and to keep heavy machinery off them. "Somehow they pulled off that work in such a way that the tree is still healthy," Homan said.

No sooner than the intersection was finished in 2019, Homan began to worry about the next round of bridge or levee work and the tons of equipment likely to crush the tree's roots. City arborist Phil Erwin told her protection under the Texas Historic Tree Coalition was the pecan's best hope. Soon after, Homan found the documentation she needed for the application when fellow community advocate Randall White introduced her to Troup.

The proclamation will arrive almost a year after Homan submitted the application. But even with historic status, the gateway pecan remains a sitting duck. Cars have struck the tree twice this year. More often than not, visitors find flowers and religious ornaments at the site in memory of loved ones killed in nearby accidents.



Wreaths and religious icons are regularly placed at the base of the tree to commemorate loved ones' deaths in traffic accidents. The tree has already been hit by cars twice this year.

Flexible posts and pavement buttons, part of the approved infrastructure plan, are still needed to better protect the tree. Homan hopes the pecan's permanent historic marker, to be created in coming months, will explain the tree's history and serve as a crash deterrent as well.

Homan credits the Dallas chapter of the League of Women Voters, which she headed from 2005-2007, as her teacher for what good government looks like and how to stand against anything less. Most recently [she successfully fought the city in court](#) to protect a dedicated no-build green space of established pecan trees, which served as a buffer between her East Kessler neighborhood and Methodist Dallas Medical Center. Because of the number of neighbors opposed to the plan, a three-fourths City Council vote was required. But in a bizarre technical debate over one of the signatures, the council threw aside the requirement and approved the request. Years of litigation ensued and finally — rather than appeal again, this time to the state Supreme Court — the city settled earlier this year.

“Someone asked me not long ago, ‘Do you have a thing for pecan trees?’ ” Homan laughed as we reminisced about the many escapades that have kept her busy since moving here in 1974. Homan, who owns what's believed to have been the city's [first comprehensive “green” house](#), completed in 2001, is passionate about increasing the local tree canopy — and not just pecan — to combat climate change. She's a lot less crazy about being in the spotlight as a good-deed doer when it's a project like the West Dallas Gateway Pecan Tree that “obviously needed to be done.” **“This tree belongs to the city and is an asset that deserves cherishing,” Homan said. “I just made sure we got the paperwork done.”**