

FACES IN THE CROWD

'Swamp man' is fountain of flood information

■ Cristofaro makes subject of drainage an entertaining topic for audience

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CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

ABOUT 120 Braeswood area homeowners recently attended a neighborhood meeting to learn about a \$40 million storm sewer and street reconstruction project designed to mitigate flooding in the area near Brays Bayou.

Pacing back and forth, Marty Cristofaro said, "Your streets will still flood in a heavy rain."

Snapping his fingers, Cristofaro added: "But it will be gone, just like that."

Cristofaro, a registered engineer with JF Thompson Inc., is the manager of the design team for Houston's Storm Water Management Program. The engineering team is designing capital improvement projects to alleviate flooding in the Texas Medical Center and in 10 Houston-area neighborhoods.

The city of Houston's 2004-08 plan includes \$95.2 million for drainage projects. That figure includes \$37.3 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and \$5 million in private funds for the Medical Center programs.

The nearly \$100 million in projects come with other costs: torn up neighborhood streets, unsightly heavy equipment, traffic snarls, and years of noisy and dirty construction work.

Cristofaro has explained all of this to hundreds of Houstonians in church and community meeting rooms citywide. So far, he's left every meeting unharmed. Somehow, Cristofaro manages to make drainage interesting, and very nearly entertaining.

He eschews the microphone, explaining that he's Italian. "So I need to talk with my hands."

As he walks back and forth during his presentations, Cris-

tofaro points to questioners, gestures widely to demonstrate the size of new storm drains, or pinches his fingers together to show the height of the curb to the street.

At the end of each meeting, Cristofaro expects to "hang back" with people who have specific questions about their street, their sidewalk, or their tree. He always brings along a set of blueprints for each project to respond to those questions.

"I want them to know I am not the big, bad wolf," Cristofaro said. "I also want them to know I am the 'Swamp man,'" referring to the acronym SWMP.

UH graduate

A native of Dayton, Ohio, and a graduate of the University of Houston, Cristofaro went to work for JF Thompson Inc. in March 1980, "three months before they shut the door" on then economically thriving Houston.

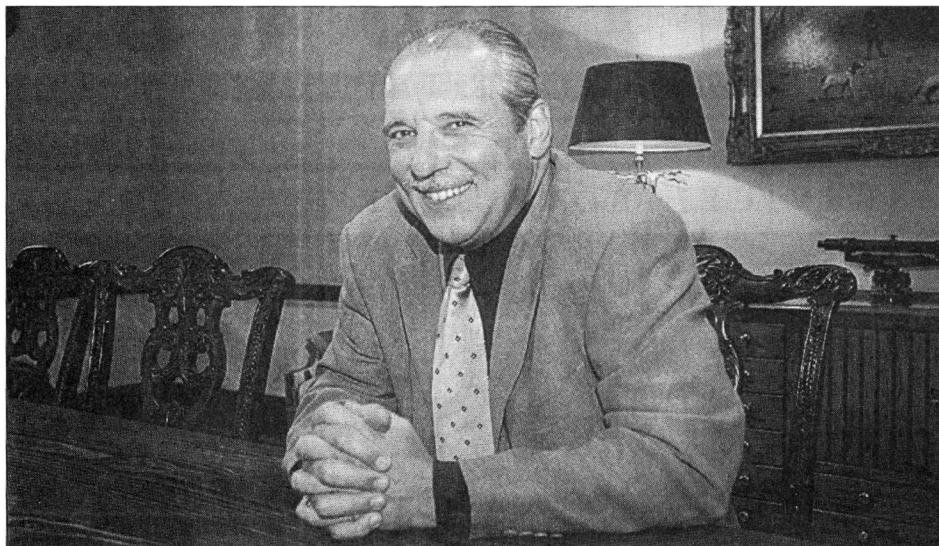
He attended Houston Community College to earn several credits before finishing college at the University of Houston. He's a registered engineer and professional land surveyor.

During Houston's boom days, Cristofaro was involved in several private land developments, including suburban residential neighborhoods and business developments.

When the oil bubble burst in the mid-1980s, JF Thompson Inc. moved into engineering for the public sector, working with the Texas Department of Transportation, Metropolitan Transit Authority, Harris County and the city of Houston.

As project manager for the SWMP effort, "My goal is to ensure the projects are on schedule and on budget, or under budget, and that it goes smoothly throughout construction," Cristofaro said.

Cristofaro never intended to become a public speaker or community relations manager. When JF Thompson told him he was first going to a neighborhood meeting, Cristofaro admitted that he was nervous.



PUBLIC SPEAKER: As the manager of the design team for Houston's Storm Water Management Program, Marty Cristofaro, a registered engineer with JF Thompson Inc., holds meetings with homeowners to explain capital improvement projects to ease flooding in the Texas Medical Center and 10 Houston-area neighborhoods.

"I'm not so nervous today — I'm only nervous if I don't know what I am going to say," Cristofaro said, adding with a chuckle, "Now, I'm typically labeled as TMI — too much information."

"I want to make sure they understand what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and the only way to do that is (to) get out there and talk with them," he added. "It's much better for me to get out to speak with people now than to get 1,000 angry phone calls later."

Houstonians have become more knowledgeable about flooding as a result of Tropical Storm Allison in June 2001, Cristofaro said.

Occasionally, participants at neighborhood meetings are not even shocked when Cristofaro explains that streets serve as "a secondary drainage system" that can keep water out of their homes.

"We can never stop flooding," Cristofaro said. "I just tell it like it is."

A major part of the effort to mitigate flooding in the Medical Center is the \$40 million Kirby

Drive storm sewer project, which will include the installation of big box culverts — 10 feet by 12 feet and 10 feet by 10 feet — under the street.

In explaining that project to area residents, Cristofaro said he will "be installing living rooms" under Kirby.

For one meeting on the Kirby project, Cristofaro even had colleagues take his picture standing inside one of the large culverts to demonstrate their size.

Detention ponds

The big boxes under Kirby, and \$40 million worth of sewer and street reconstruction in Braeswood, will serve as linear, underground detention ponds — to drain water faster from the streets and to ease the flow of storm waters into Brays Bayou.

The other projects being designed by the SWMP team will cost from \$3 million to \$6 million, Cristofaro said.

He always tries to warn residents and commuters about the impact of the projects.

"On Kirby alone, I am going to be impacting people's lives

STORM WATER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Houston Storm Water Management Program is designing capital improvements projects in the Texas Medical Center area and in several neighborhoods citywide. Visit www.swmp.org for details.

for about four or five years," Cristofaro said. "I'm going to be shoving 50,000 cars around as I get this done."

Cristofaro said he considers his first client to be the city of Houston's Department of Public Works, Division of Engineering and Construction.

"But residents of Braeswood, the Museum District and neighborhoods near Rice, Kashmere, Timbergrove, Sunnyside — they are also my clients," he said. "There are a lot of people who are going to be affected by this program. I don't run it as an 8-to-5 job. It's a program that never sleeps."

KIM CHRISTENSEN: FOR THE CHRONICLE