

2025 Regional Transportation Plan

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SUMMARY

The most glaring notion that comes out of in-depth analysis of the 2025 Regional Transportation Plan is that the Houston region proposes to accelerate and expand the land use/road paradigm that has been largely abandoned by nearly every other metropolitan region in the United States. The political philosophies that drive this plan seem to be based on the idea that the great majority of planners and elected officials around the country are wrong about the future, and that the Houston region is right. This is bold and at the Gulf Coast Institute we are supportive of bold steps. But we believe in this case that the regional initiative is wrong.

The largest driver is the supposition that some 3 million people will be added to the 8-county region by 2025. The Plan, and the 2025 Regional Growth Forecast on which it is presumably based, assume that the overwhelming majority of the new residents will live in suburban areas and hold suburban jobs. This may or may not be the case, but the forecast makes no attempt to understand the demographics of the future populations. The enormous expected growth in the number of senior citizens (who are increasingly less likely to drive while needing more and more services) and the reality that nearly all of the region's population growth will be foreign immigrants, primarily from Mexico, is not analyzed (indications are that they will be largely from urban, not suburban areas, likely to settle with others they know here who are already in our urban areas, and that they will be generally transit-dependent).

Further, forecasts use maps and charts that appear to say one thing, but may in fact reflect numbers that are entirely different from their graphic expression. Percentages of growth, for instance, are shown, implying "fast" growth in some areas, but text explanations note that the great majority of absolute growth will happen in altogether different areas. Sectors across the region are often wildly different sizes, and then pointless comparisons are made between them. Different pairs of maps show different ideas about the same information. (We note that an attempt was made to develop a new grid-based analysis tool and that there are some maps which tell a truer story, and this is very good progress over previous efforts.)

Regional travel patterns are not well explained and theses are not well supported. It is not clear whether there simply isn't good data, or the tools are inadequate, or there are political axes being ground. In any event, it seems unreasonable to launch such an ambitious and unusual plan based on the information available in the plan.

If the technical underpinnings are questionable, the vision and strategies are even more questionable considering the reported public participation and the known attitudes from other research in the region. Today, about 30 percent of people in the US express a desire for more urban lifestyles, and we certainly are seeing this dynamic in the Houston region. The Houston public is clearly calling for much more balance in transportation planning, wants more emphasis on transit, and is calling for attention to land use planning to achieve more convenient communities. Yet the plan calls for more, not less driving, and much further spreading out of communities, and finds no way to support a regional transit plan of \$12.6 billion, while stating that there is \$13 billion in funding for road projects that no local sponsor has asked for.

Land use practice receives interesting commentary but no attempt is made to begin to tie that to the plan. Indeed, some general best land use practices are swept aside as unworkable in a highly questionable modeling exercise.

An excellent study of environmental justice issues reveals bases for a variety of interesting strategies, but by and large the EJ knowledge has no positive effect on the plan. For that matter, a new ranking system using the existence of EJ issues (as well as the existence of good transit service) in neighborhoods to support the widening of many roads, an extremely cynical reaction to the high incidence of households with no cars and the commensurate high incidence of pedestrians and transit users to propose solutions that are almost certain to worsen the pedestrian realm, diminish safety, and negatively impact transit service. Arguably, this ranking system is among the greatest flaws in the plan, and needs a lot of attention.

One of the stated goals is to be environmentally responsible, and an excellent description of the region's natural resources is given. But there is nothing in the plan that responds to the sensitivity of the ecosystem or addresses any of the environmental issues that are raised by road building and the accompanying suburban development, which, after all, utterly replace the natural environment. Flooding is not addressed, preservation of forests or riparian areas or habitat are not addressed, and large-scale civic efforts to produce and preserve greenspace are simply not acknowledged.

Health is mentioned only three times in the plan, always about crashes and safety. Known dangers of fine particulates near major roadways are not mentioned, and ozone pollution is only referred to in terms of conforming to an ozone attainment plan. It is entirely inadequate to say that minimum federal standards will be met. The agency and all related agencies have a civic and human responsibility to warn citizens that dangerous activity is being proposed, and that the choice for a certain kind of economic development is being made with some knowledge that there will be negative health consequences, particularly for children, without any sort of warning or opportunity for public officials to make other kinds of decisions.

In short, bigger and more are the major directives in the plan, and it is unlikely that this philosophy is in line with public desire.

Finally, it is important to note that there are creative and interesting ideas in the plan, but that the frustrating and brutal direction overwhelm these ideas and even prevent attention to them in this document. Nevertheless, they are acknowledged by us and we hope to spend more time with them in the future.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS PROPOSED

We believe there are two actions that are required immediately in order for there to be responsible public comment on the 2025 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP):

- 1) Delay the end of public comment until the public has had at least 30 days to review correct documents that enable rational decision-making.
 - a. Through various Q&A communications with H-GAC, we have found
 - 1) incorrect numbers such as misstating the amount of lane miles to be added and inadequate reporting of numbers in previous MTPs, preventing current comparison;
 - 2) serious shortfalls in analysis such as no outside financial expert review (unlike Metro Solutions plan which went through exhaustive outside analysis), and
 - 3) inadequate cost/benefit analysis in regards to right-of-way, flooding impacts, tree loss, health effects, among several other things.
 - b. Inadequate public outreach. Some meetings had less than two weeks notice that had minimal outreach efforts.

- c. In all H-GAC meetings (with the exception of the Blueprint Houston one) no visual aide was provided to neighborhoods to show them how projects related to their businesses/homes. This is important considering some projects involve fly-overs or burying of roads in heavily residential areas that could be severely impacted by increased flooding, noise, and air pollution. Further, Appendix N (which includes a list of projects with locations) appears to be \$4 billion short of projects included in the RTP document and doesn't include Metro Solutions projects. None of this is specified in the Appendix. Therefore, the public isn't seeing the real plan or how their public officials plan to spend their money to affect their homes. What projects are excluded? Toll Roads? H-GAC hasn't answered our question on this one.

2) Take out the unsponsored projects that result from H-GAC's 100 Percent Plan study until further review.

- a. While it is appreciated that H-GAC is becoming more proactive about planning, the study that led to these projects needs improvement. These projects make up over half of the added capacity road projects - or about \$13 billion - yet there has been no public involvement for these projects. While these projects outnumber those in Metro Solutions, and could impact neighborhoods even more, there were zero public meetings on them (H-GAC has had public meetings but not for these projects). This goes against everything that's been stated about caring about the public's concerns/feedback.

The 100 percent plan's methodology at arriving at these projects was deeply flawed. It was "one-size-fits-all" that looked at meeting traffic demand with lane miles and transit separately, i.e. no multi-modal approach appears to have been used. H-GAC said it did not recommend any additional transit projects because staff needs to work with sponsors on funding and their ability/desire for such projects (all H-GAC-identified transit projects studied went unfunded and are not included in the Plan). However, they recommended \$13 billion worth of road projects without working with sponsors. This logic is inconsistent.

The H-GAC-sponsored projects should appear in a separate appendix, unfunded, as the Regional Transit Plan appears.

- b. Consultation should be expanded to groups beyond the Greater Houston Partnership (which recommended the 100 Percent Plan study to H-GAC via Harris County Judge Robert Eckels). While GHP was perfectly within its rights to recommend such a study, there are many other taxpayers in groups that have been long been requesting studies/analysis that look at the true quality of life effect of our transportation policies.
- c. These projects amount to nearly all of the lane-mile increase from the last long-term plan, "MTP 2022". This is the first time H-GAC has suggested projects to be funded on this scale and they were all about adding road capacity.

GENERAL COMMENTS BY TOPIC

Public comment process inadequate

The idea that citizens and elected officials could offer meaningful comment in just 30 days, as originally proposed, or even 60 days, as recently allowed, is simply not a reasonable idea.

To begin with, this is an extremely complex plan with many parts. It is simply not

possible to grasp it in its detail and respond adequately in such a short period of time. Further, the plan is always changing, and is represented differently in different documents published by H-GAC. Numbers on which people make comment are found to be wrong and change, requiring a second analysis. PowerPoint presentations and comments by staff are sometimes significantly different from the material contained at the 2025plan.org web site. There have been sporadic starts and stops in the process, changing schedules, conflicting information, information that appears on the Internet only to disappear a short time later, failure to explain key concepts, and so on and all of this has made it very hard for the public to examine the plan and develop understanding.

Additionally, the need to make comparison to the 2022 plan proves to be impossible, because staff now reports that the 2022 plan contained significant errors of underreporting of operations, maintenance, and preservation spending, as well as a set of numbers from Metro that were in tomorrow's dollars, while H-GAC reports today's dollars. So citizens have bad information in a previous plan, we are told, but are encouraged to accept that the current information is accurate, even though we at the Gulf Coast Institute have questioned certain assertions and numbers and then been told that in fact the published information is incorrect and will be corrected. We are grateful that these changes are made, and believe that is one of the purposes of public comment. But the uneasiness about the veracity of the remaining information makes it difficult to come to satisfactory conclusions about the plan, and even to stay abreast of its ebb and flow.

Proposal: In the future, the public comment period should be six months long, with the first three months dedicated to a single draft that does not change. Then a second draft should be prepared and that should be the one that is subjected to three more months of comment before being submitted for approval by the Transportation Policy Council.

Vision contrary to citizen values

The stated vision, a single sentence that says "Enhance mobility by providing an efficient, affordable, safe, and environmentally responsible transportation system for both people and goods" is simple enough and no one is likely to quarrel with it. But the real vision, the future that's implied for the Houston region, is much less likely to find widespread agreement. Essentially the plan makes the following broad assumptions that stand as the vision:

1. The overwhelming direction for transportation will be toward more vehicle miles traveled and more hours traveled
2. Growth will be mostly away from the existing infrastructure and will accommodate vast suburban expansion
3. Transit will be a smaller portion of spending than in the past
4. Generally accepted best land use practices will not be adopted and the concepts of more convenient communities will not play a role

It's not clear at all where the vision for this plan came from, but it's pretty clear it doesn't reflect citizen values that have emerged in a variety of studies in recent years. The Houston Area Survey¹ by Professor Stephen Klineberg of Rice has shown steady support for transit solutions to the region's mobility problems. When asked what's the best solution, people in Harris County choose more transit by 46 percent, compared to only 27 percent for more roads, which is nearly tied with the choice of

¹ Klineberg, Stephen H., "Houston Area Survey," 1982-present.
<http://www.houstonareasurvey.org>

“closer communities.”

Metro’s studies show very high acceptance of transit solutions. Blueprint Houston’s telephone survey of Houston voters, through several questions aimed at determining how Houston should grow, show a consistent pattern of preference for transit, a slowing of outward expansion, and a desire for a more urban form than we now have.

Indeed, H-GAC’s outreach shows similar desires. The first summary of that process says “Citizens expressed the desire for more travel choices, for added capacity on roadways, and for mass transit expansion. The need for more balance in our transportation system to support multi-modal travel choices that are safe, convenient, effective, and efficient for people and goods was clearly identified.”

Yet the plan responds to that citizen call for “more balance” by proposing that 83 percent of the \$29 billion for added capacity in the system go to roads and only 17 percent to transit², with a very small percent going to bike and pedestrian enhancements. This clear imbalance might be less troublesome if it didn’t appear to be greatly more road-weighted than the formula in the 2022 RTP³. That is, H-GAC is not presenting a vision that slowly backs away from road-building, but rather increases it both in relation to transit and in relation to previous plans.

Where does such a vision for explosive suburban growth and road-building to support it come from? Since there is no evidence that citizens have that sort of vision or support that set of values, one can only assume the basic assumptions come from the elected officials who govern H-GAC and the Transportation Policy Council. As it happens, the forecasts from H-GAC support the suburban vision and attempt to justify it. However, the forecasts are also questionable, biased to suburban expansion, and highly selective in arriving at their conclusions.

Proposal: In the future, a citizen advisory board should be used to create the vision and goals for the next plan. That vision and those goals, upon completion, should be submitted to the Transportation Policy Council (but not have to go through the Technical Advisory Committee, which has no capacity to judge regional policy and goals) for approval. At that point, planning should begin. Blueprint Houston has experience in this kind of visioning, and surely would be happy to assist.

Forecasts skewed to suburban expansion

H-GAC’s population and employment forecasts that provide the basis for the plan continue to show bias toward suburban expansion. This is a highly technical discussion, but it is sufficient to say several brief things here.

First, in some places the Transportation Department makes statements that are in some conflict with the findings of the agency’s Community and Environmental Planning Department, which produces the forecasts. The Plan, for instance, says

² The plan, in its discussion of transit, notes that the City of Houston is “well served” by public transportation and appears to dismiss further discussion of transit there. Ultimately, in a second document about transit, H-GAC concludes that what is needed is suburban commuter rail, but is unable to find any funding for that.

³ But it’s difficult to judge that because H-GAC says there are significantly understated road costs and overstated transit costs in the 2022 plan. These were due to “accounting errors” that did not include all the road preservation or operation and maintenance costs, and that Metro’s numbers were “tomorrow’s dollars” adjusted for inflation, while all other numbers in the plan were today’s unadjusted numbers. This means road expenditures were underreported and transit number were overreported.

Further, the 2022 plan included Metro’s “General Mobility” money (the 25 percent of the Metro sales tax penny that is spent on roads) in the transit number, whereas this time it appears in roads. The result is the cost estimates in the last published document are wrong and comparing this year’s against last year’s is like comparing apples to oranges.

employment inside the Loop will be “stable,” implying no growth, while the separate Regional Growth Forecast predicts employment growth of about 25 percent. In absolute numbers, that’s 138,000 jobs, phenomenal growth, more than any comparably sized sector in the region.

Second, in the Regional Forecast, which is the basis for the 2025 Plan, “growth” is shown in a graph as it is expected to be shared among the eight counties. Looking at both population and employment, anyone would quickly assume that the fastest growth will occur in Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Waller Counties. Harris comes in fifth, behind even Liberty County, particularly in employment growth. But “fastest” is not the same as “most” and a bullet below the graph notes that “Harris County will have the greatest absolute increase, growing by nearly 2 million people,” which is more than twice as much growth as all the other counties combined. No graph showing this dynamic is available to the public.

Third, because of huge differentials of scale, a map called Population Distribution 2025 appears to show distant suburban areas as gaining the most growth in the future. The map is divided into sectors, with a color assigned to each according to the number of people expected to live in each sector in the future. The darkest color, representing “Over 75,000” people is mostly seen in areas outside the Beltway, with no such sectors shown inside the Loop. However, the sectors are not the same size. So a sector in Montgomery County that is expected to have 75,000 people is two times the size of the entire area inside the Loop, while the Loop is divided into approximately 25 sectors, the largest of which is about 5 percent the size of the Montgomery County sector. Indeed, if one outlines an area in the center of the region that is the same size as the Montgomery sector, that area is expected to contain perhaps 750,000 people, ten times as many as the Montgomery sector. But anyone looking at these maps would come to the opposite conclusion that all growth is occurring far from downtown Houston.

Fourth, in previous years, H-GAC had published a graph showing where growth had actually occurred between 1950 and 1998. Until about 1987, most growth had occurred beyond the Beltway. But beginning that year, housing began to occur inside the Beltway and by 1998 most growth was occurring inside the Beltway, and was showing a clear rising trend as relative growth outside the Beltway dwindled. But H-GAC doesn’t publish that graph anymore, and it does not collect that data anymore. At the same time it no longer shows that graph, we see an abrupt change in historical development patterns, from inside the Beltway to outside the Beltway. Indeed in the last year of the graph in question, about 60 percent of growth was occurring inside the Beltway, while in the new forecasts, that number is suddenly reversed, without explanation.

Planners look at these maps and graphs and conclude that fortunes should be spent accommodating this distant suburban “fast growth.” But the sheer numbers of people are and will continue to be much more central.

In fairness, it is important to note here that the Community and Environmental Planning Department did attempt this time to address some of these issues of scale. There is a set of maps in which the sectors analyzed are much closer in size to each other and this shows a pattern of growth of population that is far different from the previously mentioned map. In this case, the most intense population growth occurs inside the Beltway. In this set, the map “Total Population 2025” gives a vastly different picture than the “Population Distribution 2025” map.

Finally, H-GAC does not identify who these 3 million more people will be who are assumed to be coming to the region. If the great majority of growth will continue to occur in Harris County, the forecast should note that all of Harris County’s growth in recent years has been foreign immigrants, while US citizens are leaving the County. Professor Nestor Rodriquez, a demographer at the University of Houston, projects

that the great majority of new residents will be relatively poor and uneducated people from Mexico, and that they will be largely transit-dependent people from urban places who will tend to gather in urban places. Would a plan that had such a statement in it then propose to increase road spending by record amounts to accommodate the mobility of so many people who are likely to be carless?

Proposal: In the future a citizen advisory board should be convened to hear the general findings of the Regional Forecast Committee before those findings become the basis for planning. Further, the forecasts should be consistent, with much better attention to scale, enabling some comparison of apples to apples. Finally, the forecasts should attempt to describe who the new population will be and what characteristics are likely to describe their lifestyle. An team of demographic experts could aid this effort.

Regional travel patterns unclear

An appendix to the plan and the plan itself both attempt to describe regional travel patterns now and in the future. (The plan does not note, however, that past and future transportation philosophies and projects will determine what those patterns are, nor does it explore the demographics and likely lifestyles of coming residents.)

Too much of the analysis is fragmented and confusing. The appendix notes that there are more than 390,000 work trips attracted to the four centers it calls MACs (Major Activity Centers, including the Central Business District, Uptown/Galleria, Greenway Plaza, and the Texas Medical Center.) How many work trips are there in the region each day? What percentage of all is this number? A map of Year 2000 Sector-to-MACs peak home-based work person trips shows a series of lines descending on the general center of the region and another 2025 version shows those in the future. But there is no legend on the maps, no explanations of what we're supposed to be seeing. Thin black lines radiate outward on both maps. What are these? The explanation for the 2025 map talks about improved transit service to suburban employment centers, which might, it says, lessen peak-period traffic congestion on some freeways. But what are the existing travel patterns to these suburban centers? Where are they?

A map of the top 12 Employment Centers in Harris County (are these also the top ones in the region?) omits the "Energy Corridor" on I-10. Further, it is significantly different from the Activity Centers map in the 2025 Regional Growth Forecast, which notes all of "West Houston" as an activity center that is so large geographically that it is hardly meaningful at all. Where is its center? Again, the Forecast map gives the appearance that most of the employment is in The Woodlands, Greenspoint, West Houston, Sugar Land, and Richmond/First Colony. Is that really the case?

A map showing Local and Intra-Zonal Trips is of such low resolution that it can't be read by an inquiring citizen. We have a higher resolution version, and with that map and the accompanying explanation, we are unable to determine just what the map is showing. Are all the trips occurring at peak hours? If so, are all the "attractor" numbers people coming back home after having been "produced" in the morning? If this is so, it appears a lot of people aren't coming home and a lot of others never left? What is happening in this map?

A map called CMSA Population Change 1990-2025 shows many regional sectors in a wide variety of sizes is explained as showing the "rapid growth in housing and employment locations outside of the four major employment centers." But the map legend says it is only about population change. The sectors are of such ridiculously disparate sizes that the map clearly is trying to say that the most significant population change occurred in the northwest, southwest, and southeast areas outside the Beltway. This is entirely because the scale of the sectors is simply not

comparable. Further, a map in the Regional Growth Forecast (Sector Lever Growth Comparisons) paints a very different picture, with sectors being much more comparable in size and the most intense growth show as being mostly inside, not outside, the Beltway. What is actually happening, how can we compare apples to apples?

Another map does show New Office Space Locations – 1969-2000, but it uses a series of colored dots without a legend, so it is not possible to derive meaning from the map.

One amusing statement says “The Houston region’s roadway and transit systems were not designed to facilitate the kinds of movements that are occurring today.” What were they designed to do? They seem to be doing the job that they are doing, and most people would agree that development has tracked the road system pretty carefully. Weren’t they designed to produce the development that has occurred? Certainly that is a goal, for instance, of the I-10 Major Investment Study. What is meant by this statement?

A set of tables shows AM Peak County-to-County Person Trips. These are very interesting tables. It appears to show that the trips related to counties other than Harris County are essentially trivial, but one gets the sense in other places that these extra-Harris trips are the big congestion problem needing solution. Why is that? What is wrong with the non-Harris designs that have produced such a big problem?

Nearly all the discussion is about home-based work trips. But how do children get to school? How many people each day leave home for a “work” trip – and school children would be included – and of those how many drive alone? What portion of the traffic snarl at peak hours is children being driven to school, and what portion of children are using transit, which should be considered in the traffic trips analysis. After all, they are using vehicles and the roads. How can we not consider those vehicles?

Beyond home-based work trips and school trips, what are the actual patterns of travel? Does the analysis note that more than 80 percent of all trips are not work-related? Why is the focus of the plan an attempt to use brute expansion to solve peak hour trips, when they are such a small percentage of travel? Why does the plan not attempt to explain that lifestyle choices often place people in homes far from their work, and that there might be an argument that public policy and funds shouldn’t necessarily be used to subsidize those choices, which are, in any event, very expensive to accommodate?

Proposal: In the future, an advisory board that includes citizen interests and experts should comment on the travel patterns before planning begins to respond to perceived need, and that group should agree on basic, large strategies.

Perverse new project ranking system

This year, H-GAC staff proposed a new ranking system for projects that included giving weight to issues of existing transit and environmental justice as well as several other factors. The projects in the RTP are ranked using this new system. Basically, if a project is proposed for a corridor or place that has good transit today, the project gets extra points for that. If there are environmental justice issues, particularly above-average number of households with no car, the project can get extra points for that.

As it turns out, of the large number of projects that got top rankings for transit, nearly all are for road widening. Road widening is a strategy to improve single occupant vehicle flow, thus decreasing the apparent need for transit. So these projects might go forward largely based on the existence of decent transit, and the projects would increase the competitive advantage of the car over the transit. A

reasonable person would conclude that transit use would then decline. What is the point of including transit in the rankings then, if the effect is to reduce its effectiveness?

In similar fashion, most of the projects that received the highest environmental justice scores based on large numbers of households without cars are for road widening.

It is difficult to see how making a road wider brings any benefit to people with no cars. Actually, widening roads produces a significantly worse situation for those people. First, they are largely pedestrians, and wider roads produce higher speeds and studies show there is a direct correlation between the width of the road and the number of accidents. It is much more dangerous and difficult to cross a 6-lane road than a 4-lane road. And if the people in the area are dependent on transit, they will soon find that their transit service diminishes as it fails to compete with the new facilities for cars. So the effect of using the environmental justice score in the rankings is to produce a worse situation for those people most in need.

Proposal: Establish a ranking advisory group that includes representatives from the areas of the ranking factors (transit, environmental justice, economic development, etc) to work on this issue.

NOTE: FROM THIS POINT ON, THE COMMENTS ARE RANDOM NOTES. THERE WAS INSUFFICIENT TIME TO EXPLORE AND EXPRESS EVERYTHING PROPERLY. I WOULD APPRECIATE AN OPPORTUNITY TO FINISH THIS DOCUMENT, BUT FOR THE MOMENT, HERE IS WHAT THERE IS:

Land use

Planners and public officials complain that land use planning is impossible in many places in Houston. First, counties have almost no power to do such planning under Texas law, and second, while municipalities do have that power, the biggest ones in the region, particularly the City of Houston, choose not to exercise their power in any comprehensive way. So H-GAC staff will argue that linking land use to transportation in the Houston region is essentially pointless, as private developers are the arbiters of land use.

While there are powerful tools already in the hands of many political entities, it is true that land use planning in the region is basically a fruitless exercise, implementation relying on weak incentives and persuasion.

But if land use is difficult to plan for in Houston region, then there is a responsibility to say that, to at least address such deficiencies so people can begin to decide whether or not they want to do something about that problem. Those difficulties should be described and solutions proposed, without needing to carry a feeling of blame or finger-pointing. A simple list of the places that do have and use authority and those that don't would be helpful. It might also be useful to attempt to show something about whether or not people who live in highly regulated places – and these include private developments like The Woodlands and Cinco Ranch – enjoy those regulations.

The Federal Transit Administration is considering future rules for new transit expenditures that would require transit agencies to describe plans for development around stations that would support increased ridership and economic development. Is there a reason that such a rule couldn't govern the expansion of the road system only to places that will provide, either through public or private regulation, "more convenient communities?"

This idea of more convenient communities is a part of the "quality of life"

movement that is driving future growth planning in other regions. Quality of life is used as the name of a coalition in Houston that was founded by Mayor Bill White, among others. While that coalition only supports four issues - parks, trees, removal of signs, and cleanliness – its members individually seek a wide range of quality of life improvements from housing to mobility to greater social equity. While quality of life is not as robustly defined as in other cities, it is nevertheless at the heart of most civic discussion here.

Why then is quality of life rarely mentioned in the 2025 RTP, and is not one of the plan's central goals, as is the case in Atlanta and Dallas, for instance?

General overview

This 2025 plan, at the urging of the Greater Houston Partnership, attempts to close the gap on congestion and to deal with all roadway "deficiencies" that are foreseen. However, like the last one, it does not address health, flooding, etc.

Some H-GAC staffers take pride that this is the region's first comprehensive transportation plan, and it is indeed the most ambitious, a huge change in introducing concepts in use in other regions and in trying to face up to the supposition that the 5 million people now living in the region will be joined by about 3 million more in the next 25 years.

There are creative new solutions put forward in the plan, particularly the idea of Express Streets and Smart Streets, which will be explored elsewhere in this narrative. And the general concepts of land use and transportation as tightly linked issues is described, as is the value and sensitivity of the region's complex ecosystem.

Further, H-GAC staff has been increasingly sensitive to public comments and there have been responsive changes in the rollout process as it moves along. These changes are largely about how and when the public will participate, although there have also been some corrections and enhancements of the draft plan itself and more are expected to come to that document and to some of the appendices that support it.

In private discussions, H-GAC staff appear to have progressive, professional goals. But all the public can see in the published documents is the brute force described and proposed in the RTP, a vast proposal for a new level of road building probably unmatched anywhere in the United States, with the possible exception of Houston in the 1980s.

What seems most clearly in need of change – the lack of a holistic vision for the future based on shared citizen goals - is unlikely to occur. The plan essentially accepts that some dominant development patterns from the 1980s and 1990s will not only continue unabated, but in fact probably should be supported. Transportation Manager Alan Clark has said we "must penetrate suburban markets."⁴ At one point the plan talked about "accommodating emerging suburban travel patterns" as though those shouldn't be questioned. That phrase has disappeared in the current version, but a large number of decisions evident in the plan support the notion that people will drive longer distances than they do today, that vehicle miles traveled will continue to rise, as will vehicle hours traveled. These are symptoms of spreading growth out over increasing large areas and of land use patterns of separation and specialization commonly known as "sprawl."

It is never stated, of course, but this enormous regional shoulder shrug appears to accept that developers, west side real estate interests, and the engineering and construction industries, in concert with suburban elected officials, rule the future as strongly as they have ruled the recent past.

Houstonians already drive more each day than citizens of any other metropolitan

⁴ Livable Houston/Smart Growth Initiative meeting, January 2004

region and have the third-highest household transportation costs in the region. The conscious decision to pursue increases in vehicle miles traveled as the basic strategy for the region begs the question about who made that decision.

Express Streets, Smart Streets

"Express Streets" and "Smart Streets" are a major piece of the new spending priorities of H-GAC, but these are not defined in the RTP draft, nor is it likely many people will find definitions and descriptions of them. A description is found in the document "2025 RTP Goals and Recommendations," published on March 26 but not available on the 2025 Plan web site. Other explanation is only available from the consultant.

Commuter Rail

The plan, in a discussion of commuter rail, notes that "several commuter lines appear to offer the potential for sizeable transit volume," and that "several of these lines appear to have potential for shifting a sizeable number of VMT to transit."⁵ One of those mentioned is an IH-10 W ("Katy") line. The Texas Department of Transportation has previously found that there would be insufficient demand for transit in that corridor, and so it is not included in the IH 10 expansion plan, construction for which is still not quite begun. So which assertion is correct? How smart is it for the RTP, which is now saying transit could play a "sizeable" role on IH 10, to contain that expansion project which specifically does not provide for transit? Why not build it now? The only allowance for future rail transit is in Harris County's takeover of the HOV lane and expansion of that into a pair of two-lane toll and HOV lanes that it says Metro would have to take over again in order to provide rail, a possibility that County Commissioner Steve Radack discounted.

⁵ 2025 RTP Regional Transportation Plan Houston-Galveston Area Draft, March 9, 2004. Page 34, "100 Percent Transit Solution."