



# UPDATE on Issues

April 2010

League of Women Voters of the Houston Area

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation systems and patterns have a powerful relationship to land use. If a city has a comprehensive plan, that plan drives both. If not, like Houston, both land use decisions and transportation system decisions affect each other but in an uncoordinated and usually inefficient fashion.

An owner wants to increase the value of his rice fields in Fort Bend County so he donates land to the Texas Department of Transportation and the route of US 59 is determined. Land is cheaper in the far reaches of Harris County and there are few state building codes so big residential developments of large lots and large houses go up. New residents discover how much more house they can get for their money than where they came from, so they buy in these distant and attractive developments. Houston city streets have to reach out and connect the new residents to their places of work.

One trend developing over the past decade or so is “Smart Growth.” Its principles advocate development decisions that will accommodate more people without the sense of overcrowding, alleviate the dependence on the automobile, expand choices in housing and transportation, and strengthen existing neighborhoods.

One tool in this approach is Transit Oriented Development (TOD)—a coordination of planning for transportation systems and land use, specifically around transit stations. Strategically-planned station areas help promote the economic, social, and environmental well-being of a city. How?

- Highlighting transportation alternatives and increasing transit ridership
- Taking advantage of non-peak direction transit capacity
- Decreasing auto dependency and exhaust emissions
- Using adjacent land efficiently to help create a more compact urban form
- Making better connections between jobs and housing
- Revitalizing commercial corridors and older communities
- Providing market housing in a variety of forms and price ranges
- Creating opportunities for affordable housing
- Providing increased neighborhood and travel options for those not owning cars
- Making identifiable and walkable neighborhoods
- Creating more street activity and a safer environment
- Acting as a catalyst for private investment and development
- Increasing assessed values of vacant and underused land.

Why would that be important in Houston? The Houston region is projected to gain more than 3 million in population in the next 10 – 20 years. While the region has one of the lowest housing costs in the country, it has one of the highest transportation costs. METRO has in design or construction five additional light rail lines which, when connected to the Main Street line, will form an almost city-wide transit network supported by its already extensive bus routes. The routes connect the east side of

Houston to downtown, the UH/TSU/community college areas to the Galleria, and downtown through the Northside eventually to Intercontinental Airport. They will run through all sorts of Houston neighborhoods.

How might TOD help Houston absorb the expected population growth? Properly implemented, TOD accomplishes a number of things:

- It gets land use right—encourages mixed use; ensures transit use, locates uses as close to the stations as possible
- It creates density
- It creates convenient pedestrian connections—short walking distances to a variety of uses, wide sidewalks, uses at street level
- It ensures good urban design—high quality streets, relates ground to pedestrian uses, signage, landscaping, lighting
- It creates compact development patterns
- It manages parking—not too much, not too little, at rear and on sides of buildings, provides for bicycles, moves from surface to structured parking as needed
- It makes every station a “place”

What is Houston doing? As METRO launched its expansion planning to connect major activity centers, the City commissioned an extensive urban corridor study supported by an inclusive stake-holders group that met periodically with the consultants to provide input and feedback as recommendations developed. The consultants also held meetings in all the neighborhoods affected to ascertain citizen concerns and wishes. The resulting recommendations were reviewed by the Planning Commission and City Council to determine what ordinances should be adopted to ensure that the transit corridors would deliver the expected community benefits in addition to the ease of moving about the City. Recommendations focused on the public realm and included wide sidewalks, street tree placement, setbacks, and lighting. Objections centered around fears of changes to neighborhoods, the effect on property valuation and property taxes, concern for property rights, and the preference for market-driven decisions rather than those imposed by rule or incentive.

While most of the recommendations were not adopted, they remain both a possibility for future Council action and a pattern to guide future development around transit stations.

--Martha Murphree

.Discussion questions:

1. Are there problems with Houston’s current transportation planning?
2. Are the listed benefits of TOD relevant to you personally? To the public at large? In what way?
3. Which, if any, of the concerns do you share?
4. What is the difference between a “mobility” plan and a “transportation” plan? Which does Houston need?
5. How important are wide sidewalks or street trees to an effective pedestrian environment?
6. Is TOD appropriate for Houston?