



The Houston General Plan

A Blueprint for Houston's Future- 2025

Proposal to
Mayor Lee P. Brown

“We must emphasize the need for broad planning if enduring values are to be achieved, planning that not only provides for the present need, but for future expansion. An element of daring along with sound study is as important in city building as in successful business.”

– J. M. West, Chairman, the Houston City Planning Commission, January 2, 1941

The Houston 2025 Committee
June 2002

Milestones

Organization – Appointment of the Steering Committee

Fund raising

Preparation of “Compendium of Plans”

Demographic analyses and projections

Presentation of current metropolitan practices

Public outreach – neighborhood visions and values

Scenario-building process

Publication of “Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025:

A Blueprint for Houston’s Future”

Executive Summary

In brief:

Mayor Lee P. Brown has asked the Houston 2025 Committee to begin a public process to develop a Houston General Plan. The planning process is proposed in two phases.

Phase One, to be completed in Summer 2003, will culminate in a published document, "Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025: A Blueprint for Houston's Future," to be the focus of public dialogue during the 2003 elections. It will contain a cohesive civic vision, a set of principles to guide public policy in the City of Houston, and identification of the various implementation mechanisms essential to achieving that vision.

Phase Two will begin following the 2003 elections. The Houston General Plan will then be completed over a two-year period, subject to concurrence by the new Mayor and Council.

The need for planning - background

With a 2002 metropolitan population of some 4.6 million people growing by some one million new residents each decade, Houston needs to deal more effectively with the basic problems facing the city and region. This growth will have impacts on many issues including mobility, visual blight, air quality, flooding, neighborhood quality, health, education and public safety. It is important to recognize that the political and administrative structure of the City of Houston does not afford control over all the factors that will influence growth in and around Houston; but failure to exert control where it can, and failure to influence factors that it cannot entirely control, can only lead to greater problems.

What should the city do now to address the impact of such growth? Will the city be better or worse off for the growth? Do we want the city to respond primarily to the forces and uncertainties of the marketplace, or do we want to be proactive in preparing for and guiding growth in some fashion? Given these concerns, planning for the future is essential.

While the city has grown and prospered without the traditional planning tool of zoning, the city has not developed with-

out any planning. Examples of important tools of Houston planning include:

- The Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan, reviewed and updated annually, provides a general plan for the layout of major roadways.
- The Subdivision Ordinance sets out the rules for subdividing and developing land, and is the basic tool governing land development.
- The Capital Improvements Program provides a planned approach to infrastructure development.
- The Library and Parks and Recreation Departments' long-term master plans outline service expansion into the future.
- Various studies and plans prepared over the years such as the Main Street Corridor Master Plan, the Buffalo Bayou Plan,

flood control and drainage plans, water and sewage treatment facilities plans, and "Imagine Houston" provide visions and actions.

Common to most of these plans is a lack of relationship, one to another, in terms of money, priorities, land use, infrastructure, population density, and transportation. Perhaps more importantly, none of these plans derived from an expressed, commonly-held vision, a set of shared values, reflecting the kind of city Houstonians desire over the next 25 or 50 years.

For our future



The challenges of growth: toward a planning process

We believe that most City residents, the business community, and elected officials all want the Houston that the next generation inherits to be significantly better because of what we do today. "Quality of life" is on everyone's mind. We can't be assured that the city will be a better place unless there is a plan that reflects our common vision, values and goals, and priorities. We can't effectively complete that plan without a well organized, participatory process. The process described below is political and civic, for without the political leadership and civic support nothing meaningful will happen. Political will and leadership are not necessarily confined to elected officials. The business and civic community must be informed on the

issues that affect the future of Houston, and they must be prepared to insist upon support from mayoral and council candidates in 2003 for an extensive public process designed to produce a coherent vision and plan for the future of Houston.

It is important that such planning be comprehensive in nature, addressing interdependent economic, social, physical, and quality of life issues, even if it involves only the areas under City of Houston jurisdiction. However, the process should involve, to the extent possible, Harris County, the surrounding counties, Metro, H-GAC, TxDot, and other agencies.

The process: Phase One

While the process of city-wide general planning must be politically driven, the leadership and direction must come from a diverse group, representing the many segments of the community, with the city governmental structure as an important player and partner, but in a supportive role. The process should be led by a Steering Committee of 20-30 people, appointed by the Mayor, which will be responsible for fund raising, promotional efforts, expenditure of funds, and the organization and direction of the process. The Steering Committee could eventually be structured as a 501 C(3) nonprofit entity. The Houston 2025 Committee will be responsible for initial fund raising.

The initial effort will be to develop informational materials for wide dissemination intended to raise the understanding of the public about what a comprehensive planning process can do and, alternatively, what is likely to happen in Houston without such an effort. The following are examples of the kinds of materials and exercises that will be developed during this process:

- A "Compendium of Plans", summarizing the many plans and vision statements (old and current), documenting and explaining how they do or don't fit together.
- Demographic analyses and projections of future growth.
- Relevant information, including presentations by outside experts, on how other cities deal with the issue of planning for future growth.
- A series of public outreach initiatives, with a strong neighborhood orientation, involving focus groups, surveys,

seminars, town hall meetings, and other public events, to increase citizen participation and input, to raise public awareness of planning issues, and to produce a community vision, goals, and a set of core city-building principles.

- A "scenario-building process", resulting in three growth scenarios, their implications for the future.
- Preparation of a draft planning framework document, "Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025", summarizing the Phase I work, and setting the stage for proceeding with the Houston General Plan, in early 2004.
- Publication of "Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025"

This process, to take place over the next twelve months, will be an educational effort culminating at a critical point in the next municipal election cycle.

The background analyses, the vision and values resulting from the public outreach events, and the outcomes of the scenario building process will be assembled in a planning framework document, entitled

"The Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025: A Blueprint for Houston's Future," setting the stage for proceeding with the Houston General Plan in early 2004. In the months preceding the 2003 elections, the "Blueprint" will be presented to the Planning Commission, City Council, and the general public through media and in town meetings, in an effort to convince candidates to support a general planning process if and when they are elected to office. Planning thus will become an important issue in the 2003 elections.



Phase Two: The Houston General Plan

This phase would begin in early 2004, and presupposes a commitment by the then Mayor and City Council to support a continuing planning process. City financial support for the planning effort will depend upon budget constraints at that time.

The components of a general plan, to be called The Houston General Plan, are briefly described below. A set time frame is not defined, as that will be a function of financial resources and complexity. Elements of the General Plan may be adopted by City Council; other elements may be suitable for simple acknowledgment by Council and some may be appropriate for a vote of the electorate.

The key to a successful plan rests on organization and process. If there is wide public involvement, the plan, whatever its content, will reflect the general vision and goals of the people who make up the city. That is the foundation for success.

The planning process should be directed by the Mayor's Steering Committee, assisted by a "Congress" of perhaps 75 people, appointed by



Council Members and the Mayor, to drive the planning effort. A chairperson and vice chairperson should be designated by the Mayor for a term of six months, after which the Committee itself should elect officers every two years. The chairperson should be responsible for setting up a committee structure, scope of work, budget, and schedule. The goal should be to complete the plan document over a two-year period. The Planning Commission and the Planning Department would play important roles in this process.

In summary, the General Plan encompasses the entire community and addresses interdependent growth, community revitalization, and quality of life/quality of place issues. It deals comprehensively with issues such as economic development, transportation, land development patterns, streets, infrastructure and flooding, parks, housing and neighborhoods, recreation and community facilities, downtown and the inner city, the environment, public health and safety, poverty, education, and numerous other issues. While it should take into account the regional context, it can only be implemented within the jurisdiction of the city.

Defining the General Plan

The General Plan is a set of principles, policies, strategies, standards, and priorities to achieve the expressed vision and shared goals of Houstonians. It should be a value-driven "blueprint" or roadmap for guiding future growth and development of the city, generally for a period of 20-25 years. It is, by Charter, adopted by the Planning Commission and ratified by City Council. More specifically, the Plan is:

- A detailed statement of the collective vision for Houston's future.
- A citizen-based statement of short-term and long-term goals.
- A set of priorities to guide goals, policies, and strategies necessary to deal with the economic, social, and physical consequences of growth.
- The official policy statement to guide further planning, urban design, public improvements, development standards, and the general development of the City.
- The primary decision-making tool for the City's Capital

Improvements Program and other programs such as housing, finance, economic development initiatives, redevelopment, and development ordinances.

- An important tool for coordinating, from a broad city viewpoint, regional growth issues, involving the surrounding counties, Metro, H-GAC, and others.
- An implementation plan, including mechanisms and institutional entities necessary to achieve the community vision.

The first part of the General Plan would be the General Framework Plan, building on "Opportunities and Challenges of Growth 2025", completed in Phase One. The second part would incorporate specific as well as general planning proposals responsive to the visions and goals set out in the Framework Plan, and contain the Plan "elements". The third part would contain implementation recommendations that deal with programs and policies, intergovernmental coordination, funding and related issues.

Elements of a general plan

The elements of the General Plan could include:

- Transportation, storm water management, and other infrastructure planning;
- Community growth patterns and the structure of the City;
- Neighborhood revitalization, and affordable housing;
- Economic development initiatives and incentives that enhance downtown and other major activity centers;
- Community facilities;
- Environmental stewardship;
- Public health and safety.

After adoption, the Houston General Plan will become an essential policy guide for coordinated actions that shape the growth and quality of life in Houston, and to a large degree, of the metropolitan region.



Benefits of a general plan

The primary benefits of a General Plan for Houston include:

- Broad community support for future growth and development;
- Coordination of capital investments in transportation and infrastructure to ensure maximum impact on growth and development;
- Intergovernmental coordination within the metropolitan region;
- Improved mobility and air quality;
- Effective Institutional mechanisms for addressing issues critical to the city and the region, such as mobility, air quality, flooding, the visual environment, and overall quality of life.
- Conservation of our historical, cultural, and natural resources.
- A more stable tax base and efficient use of taxpayer dollars.
- Greater competitiveness for the region in the 21st century global economy.

Phase One milestones

