League of Women Voters Houston Area
October General Meeting

Follow Up Questions and Action Items

What positive steps are being taken toward creating a more livable Houston? Does Houston have a plan to address the concerns outlined in your presentation? Are there public policy initiatives that would support progress toward this vision?

Many good things are happening to move the City of Houston toward being a city of connected walkable urban centers. With 3.6 million more people coming to our region over the next 30 years and vast amounts of wetlands and prairies at risk, setting the stage for desirable density throughout the region is crucial. Public participation in processes currently underway at the City of Houston (COH), the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC), and the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) will shape the political and economic framework for the development of the region for the next 50 years.

The City of Houston Planning Department is involved in a series of efforts that could bode very well for the future of Houston. Planning Commissioner Jeff Ross is leading the so-called Plan to Plan Committee, developing a proposal for how the city should undergo a General Plan process, as mandated by the City Code and championed by Council Member Peter Brown, Blueprint Houston, and the Gulf Coast Institute. The Houston City Council voted over the summer to direct the Planning Commission to report back to the Council in 180 days with a proposed budget, work plan, and target date for adoption of a general plan. Ideally, this effort will result in the beginning of the actual General Planning process early next year.

In July, the HCC/Ensemble Tomorrow Workshop considered the obstacles to and potential for transit-oriented development in midtown. Initiated by the Gulf Coast Institute and others, this charrette was run by the Environmental Protection Agency and included national experts in economics, parking, and development. Representatives from the City of Houston worked alongside developers and business owners, to discuss work to be done and generated excitement for a productive public, private partnership to encourage midtown development.

The City of Houston Planning Department is leading a separate effort, called the Urban Corridors Planning Initiative, focused on future transit nodes of the METRO Solutions Phase II plan. The introduction of Guided Rapid Transit will normally raise property values and encourage redevelopment within a zone of about a quarter mile from each stop. The Urban Corridors Planning Initiative will bring together the business community, residents, developers, and regulators to identify common goals for the development of these transit nodes. Ideally this will result in the adjustment of city codes to allow for transit-oriented development and density appropriate to transit nodes, and will empower community members to participate in the economic development expected to occur there.

Several positive efforts are ongoing at the Houston-Galveston Area Council and will have long-term effects on the region. The 2035 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) effort is
underway now and will include several opportunities for public input. Because of the work in a process called **Envision Houston Region**, preliminary materials and discussions seem to be very positive. The **Gulf Coast Institute** is committed to contributing to this effort, supporting the visionary elements of the Plan, and making sure that the desires of citizens are met.

In the private arena, active developers and homebuilders are making moves to concentrate their efforts on dense urban livable human habitat in the Houston region. The Sugar Land Town Center has rightfully received much attention in the press, but twenty-six other similar projects are being developed or considered all around the Houston region. These town centers will allow people to live, work, shop, and play in a small area, allowing them the choice to be less auto-dependent. Eventually, these town centers should grow even denser and will be important transit stops on a fully developed regional system.

**What can citizens do to support this effort toward a cleaner and greener Houston?**

Citizens and community groups could express their support for the positive efforts to make Houston a more livable city. Because land use is really the central issue, and nothing impacts land use like transportation infrastructure, we believe citizen involvement in long-term planning, such as the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan, is essential to achieving effective planning tools for the future. Letters of support can be sent to Alan Clark for his efforts to achieve a citizen-based vision for the 2035 RTP. Also, comments can be emailed to transportation.comments@h-gac.com

Alan Clark  
Houston-Galveston Area Council  
3555 Timmons Lane  
Suite 120  
Houston, TX 77027

(cc to your City Council Member or County Judge)  
More information on the previous (2025) RTP can be found here: [http://tinyurl.com/nayxt](http://tinyurl.com/nayxt)

Those who support the idea of a comprehensive plan for the City of Houston, should send letters to Jeff Ross, who is leading the “Plan to Plan” effort, to let him know that the citizens support his efforts and hope that it will result in a true general planning process soon with extensive citizen involvement.

Jeff Ross  
c/o Planning and Development Department  
City of Houston  
P.O. Box 1562  
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

(cc to Dr. Carol Lewis, chair of Planning Commission)  
c/o Planning and Development Department  
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P.O. Box 1562  
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For more information: [http://tinyurl.com/y78385](http://tinyurl.com/y78385)
What should we be looking for and addressing as plans for the urban transit system become known?

It is critical that transit lines have stations where people and activities are clustered. Watch for efforts to move those lines away from any neighborhoods or districts that small numbers of people try to protect. These are also efforts, unintended or not, to reduce ridership and threaten the success of the entire system.

While the overall METRO Solutions plan will take Houston a good step forward towards becoming an enjoyable sustainable city, particular details that have yet to be decided can still make a major difference. Citizens can be involved in several ways. Subscribing to the METRO Solutions newsletter is a great way to understand developments in the METRO Solutions plan as they emerge, and to be aware of opportunities for public input (http://www.metrosolutions.org/go/mailinglist/1068/). Participation in any public comment opportunities by citizens living and working along the proposed lines as well as others from throughout the region is essential for METRO to have a useful understanding of citizen concerns.

Simply letting METRO know that the public supports the ongoing process and want the best possible urban transit system for Houston would also be helpful. METRO is in the process of setting up their community relations process to work with business and residents along the coming transit lines to mitigate business interruption and achieve the community’s goals while developing an effective transit system. These representatives can be found here: http://www.metrosolutions.org/go/page/1068/17193/. Now that METRO has taken the responsibility to reach out to the community and avoid problems like those seen during the construction of the Main Street Line, it is essential that neighborhood groups and businesses along the line reciprocate. Ideally, small business leaders will emerge who might create a business association of those who will be affected by the coming line so that the transit system and local business can grow together.

Is there anything organizations like the League of Women voters can do to better inform the electorate?

White papers on a variety of issues would be very helpful. Carolyn Mata has been meeting with the Livable Houston Study Group, which will be focusing on the 2035 RTP as it develops. The Gulf Coast Institute plans to keep all of the member groups of this study group aware of what is happening and when citizen input can take place.

The Citizens’ Transportation Coalition is working on addressing their transportation concerns to candidates in the upcoming election. Perhaps the League of Women Voters could assist in this effort to make it as transparent and helpful as possible. We believe that candidates for states and federal representation as well as local elected officials should be aware of the desires of the citizens to preserve green space and build a more livable city. Our elected officials views and actions concerning transportation infrastructure will have a powerful effect on the future of the region.

Perhaps the League could meet with Council Member Peter Brown to discuss the General Plan and help to explain to the voters what such a plan would entail and what they should expect or hope for. Also, meeting with other Council Members to explain and support the General Plan could be very helpful.
Timeline of Opportunities for Public Input

2035 Regional Transportation Plan Schedule – The Draft Plan for the 2035 RTP will be submitted to the Transportation Policy Council in December 2006. Upon approval, a period of 30 days will be open for public comment. This will most likely be extended to 60 days. After the public comment period, the TPC will approve the RTP and submit it for Federal approval. The main opportunity for public input will be January and February, but letters of support can be sent to Alan Clark at any time.

The Plan-to-Plan Committee – The Long Range/General Plan Committee meeting are ongoing and are open to the public, although discussion and comment is restricted to committee members. Currently, the final meeting is scheduled for December 26, 2006. Anytime before this, letters of support to Jeff Ross would be helpful. The schedule can be found at the following address: http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/PC_committees/long_range/lr_meeting_times.htm

METRO Solutions and the Urban Corridors Planning Initiative – The Urban Corridors Planning Initiative is designed to coincide with the METRO Solutions process for developing the new transit corridors in Houston. Each of the proposed corridors of the METRO plan is going through a separate Federal process, so each has a slightly different schedule. The best way to stay abreast of opportunities for public input is to sign up for the METRO Solutions newsletter, as mentioned above, which can be done at the following address (http://www.metrosolutions.org/go/mailinglist/1068/). Currently the Urban Corridors Planning Initiative does not have any publicized dates for further public input, but they have published a general schedule shown below.