

Downtown Access and Circulation Overview

Central Houston, Inc.

August 19, 2004

Introduction

Downtown remains remarkably accessible to all areas of the region while growth continues to stress the transportation system. As indicated in the TRIP 2000 study sponsored by the Greater Houston Partnership, there is no apparent way to provide lane miles of roadway to maintain acceptable congestion levels. Managing travel demand will be required. Downtown is well positioned in this respect. It has the highest levels of public transit, vanpools and carpools. Now it is the center of a growing inner city housing market providing an opportunity for reduced trips both in number and length.

Freeway Access

Based on 2002 TranStar average freeway speeds, the most congested freeways were Loop 610 West including the U.S. 290 interchange, the Katy Freeway, and U.S. 290. Other congested segments near downtown included U.S. 59 Eastex (this has since improved), I-10 East and I-45 south of Loop 610. Since 2002 construction is under way on the Katy and the West Loop, while construction continues on U.S. 59 Southwest Freeway. This includes the portion with Spur 527 that has caused much concern. Interchange reconstruction for U.S. 59 Eastex into downtown is nearing completion.

Major investment studies have been completed for U.S. 290, S.H. 288, I-45 North, I-45 South and S.H. 35. This allows TxDOT to begin design of 122 specific projects totaling some \$3 billion.

Of significance is that freeway improvements over the past twenty years have included HOV lanes that allow for significant travel time savings to downtown. Every major freeway into downtown except I-10 East has an HOV lane. The Spur 527 project will result in the Southwest Freeway HOV connecting to the Transit Streets in Midtown.

Toll roads are increasingly significant in providing regional access. Earlier this year the Westpark Toll Road opened from far west Houston to Loop 610. Planning and land acquisition is progressing for the extension of the Hardy Toll Road from Loop 610 to I-10.

Arterial Street Access

Downtown is better served than any other activity center by an abundance of arterial streets. In many locations, these streets provide access to downtown without dependency upon the region's overused freeway network. The \$268 million METRO Transit Streets Program is making significant improvements to arterials in downtown and Midtown. Now under construction, Travis is the final contract of the program. New and

synchronized traffic signals have significantly improved travel times in the Main Street Corridor between the Texas Medical Center and downtown.

The area of downtown most in need of arterial street improvement is north of Buffalo Bayou. The light rail on Main Street has reduced its traffic capacity from North Main. A proposal is advancing for the extension of North San Jacinto to connect to Fulton north of I-10. Plans are being developed for the reconstruction of the Elysian Viaduct. We are pushing for the design to be that of an arterial street.

Although not as definite, plans exist for a new tunnel connecting Commerce to the east to Navigation. The expansion of the George R. Brown and construction of Minute Maid Park and Toyota Center closed five streets that connected to the East End. There are no proposals to add street capacity that was lost.

Transit Access

Downtown has remained the focus of Houston's mass transit system since the 1870's when mule-drawn trolleys were introduced. With METRO's creation in 1979, substantial resources became available to increase public transit. As a result, 41% of total peak period trips into downtown in 2002 are by non-single occupant vehicles, e.g. carpool, vanpool, bus, taxi, bicycle or walking. With the METRO Solutions plan adopted by the voters last fall, this percentage increases to 48% by 2025.

These numbers are high when compared to the region. In 2002 Texas Medical Center had 32% non-single occupant vehicle peak hour trips, Galleria 6% and Greenway Plaza 6%. For the METRO service area, the 2002 number was 9% of peak hour trips.

In addition to the 64 miles of light rail, the METRO plan adds two way capacity to existing HOV lanes. Nine new park and ride lots are planned as well as nine new transit centers. Forty-four new bus routes are added with 1,038 route miles. This is a 50% increase in bus service. New express bus service is envisioned in several well-established transit corridors including Bellaire and Westheimer.

In all, the plan provides more transit service throughout the region, while downtown is benefited.

From more recent discussions, construction of an east-west line through downtown is an issue as well as a development of an intermodal transportation center to the north of downtown. Recent statements by the new METRO leadership team would appear to indicate an understanding of the downtown community's desire that the east-west line must be below grade. The Downtown District was notified by TxDOT last week of a planning grant for an intermodal center.

With envisioned improvements, downtown's transit facilities would include 13 transit streets, the Main Street light rail, an east-west light rail subway, the (south) Downtown Transit Center, the Transit-to-Tunnel Superstop (1000 Main), an (north) intermodal

transportation center, and HOV lanes approaching from all directions. The key to the realization is federal funding. This is dependent upon Houston's congressional delegation and preservation of the METRO sales tax in the legislature.

Downtown Circulation

Being able to move around without one's car is a major downtown asset. This can occur by walking (on the sidewalk or in the tunnels or skywalks), taxis, private shuttles or limos, or trolleys. METRO's trolley system replaced the old Texas Special bus routes in 1998. The trolleys were intended to be unique, fun and convenient. They were purchased with federal congestion mitigation grant funding, and the free fare was an offset to downtown workers facing the construction disruption of Transit Streets. The system cost about \$3 million per year to operate, and after reaching a high of over 10,000 passengers per day in 2001, now has about 3,500 per day. METRO is evaluating future options for the trolley including reducing service or cancellation.

Taxi service within downtown is difficult with drivers often refusing or griping about downtown trips, preferring longer, more economically productive trips such as the airports. The opportunity cost is a serious issue for taxi drivers who are independent businesses, and basically renders downtown taxi service as a non-start. This situation results in downtown hotels using van shuttles or limousines at considerable expense.

Transportation Planning

Recently the Transportation Policy Committee of Houston-Galveston Area Council approved the 2025 Regional Transportation Plan for the eight-county urban area. This is the federally mandated document that addresses regional mobility including the port and the airports. \$77 billion of priority improvements as well as federal, state and local funding sources are identified in the plan.

The plan meets the travel demands of a projected household population growth of 3 million by 2025 with about 2.5 million inside of the Beltway 8. Regional employment is forecasted to increase by 1.3 million. The plan assumes that employment increases from 750,000 to over 1 million inside of Loop 610 between 2000 and 2025. Household population inside of Loop 610 was assumed to increase only slightly over the same period, in contradiction to recent strong evidence of demand for urban living.

Regional travel patterns are changing with a larger percentage of trips going to more work locations throughout the region. However, downtown will remain the largest employment center (140,000 in 2000) joined by Uptown (70,900), Greenway Plaza (62,000) and Texas Medical Center (55,800). With over 325,000 employees in 2000, these four centers will continue to be the employment heart of the region.

The RTP assumes that vehicle miles traveled will increase 75% by 2025---a faster rate than either population or employment. To respond, the following strategies are incorporated:

- Added lanes in major corridors;
- Upgrade existing arterials to “smart” streets with signal synchronization, access limitations, and grade separations;
- Implementation of the METRO Solutions Plan;
- Additional transit in the region beyond the METRO Plan;
- Adding infrastructure for non-motorized travel;
- Targeting activity centers, districts and corridors for bicycle and pedestrian travel;
- Adequate funding to maintain the existing road network;
- Mitigation of the 344 worst crash hot spots.

Not included in the RTP was the recommendation offered in the TRIP 2000 Study of changing the urban scheme by adopting a “mobility first” mentality. This omission is largely because the RTP is federally mandated to balance travel demand based on projected population patterns. Current projections are the result of market trends. Changing the urban scheme requires policy initiatives by local governments consciously addressing denser development patterns.