

# Transportation Disconnect: Are Supply and Demand Out of Sync in Houston?

*Public opinion in professional surveys and government-mandated transportation plans reveals a mismatch between where the public wants to spend its transportation dollars and where those dollars are actually going.*

By Catherine Rentz Pernot

In the 1980s, transportation planning in Houston was very simple: when demand increased, planners simply poured more pavement and the public was largely satisfied. By the 1990s, the pouring stayed the same, but the public began demanding more sophisticated solutions. By 2003, transportation tops out as Houstonians' most serious concern and it appears that transportation supply is disconnected from public demand, which increasingly favors transit.

Recent government-mandated transportation plans and public surveys show what may be surprising evidence to those who have viewed Houston and highways as synonymous: once well-known road supporters, Houstonians are now more likely to be public transit proponents. Yet road-dominated transportation plans show that the products being offered are significantly out of sync with what Houston's customers would like to see.

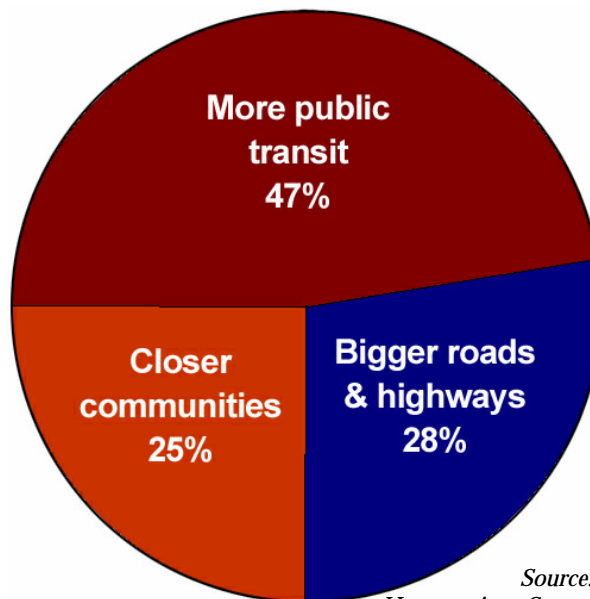
The evidence of such a disconnect between public demand and government supply comes from long-established professional public opinion researchers, from governmental transportation agencies, and from grassroots citizen groups.

This paper first looks at why public opinion is important. It then examines the disconnect itself as evidenced in public opinion surveys and government-mandated transportation plans. Finally, the paper presents possible reasons for the disconnect and proposes several ways for the two sides to reach a greater equilibrium.

### Is public opinion relevant?

Before examining the disconnect, it is first necessary to look at why public opinion is important. Many argue that the public is not qualified when it comes to making complex decisions that require expertise of travel demand models and other sophisticated evaluations. Undoubtedly, transportation planning requires distinct training and experience. Yet ultimately, the public pays the bills. The public pays the salaries of the planners and decision-makers and it pays for the products they produce. The "customers are the people." These words, spoken by US Representative Tom DeLay (R- Sugar Land) at a recent transportation conference, make the case that the

**"The best long-term solution to traffic problems in the Houston area?"**



Source: Houston Area Survey



public paying taxes for transportation projects are very similar to customers paying a price for a product. While the public, like customers buying a certain product, do not necessarily want to have a say in how one makes the product, they do want to have a say in what they purchase.

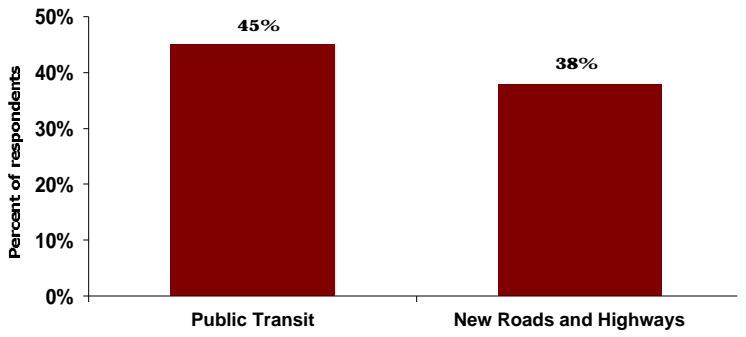
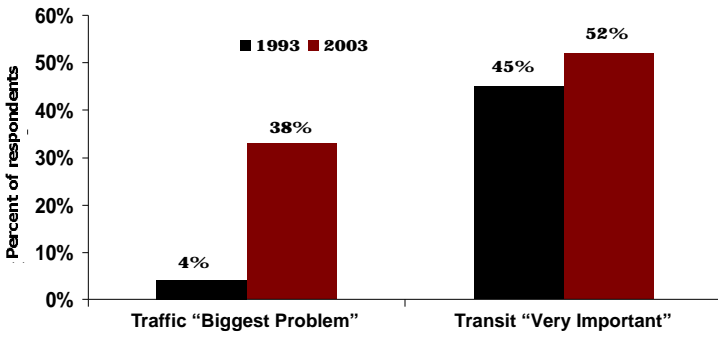
In this case the public, like a customer, needs to be satisfied with the product for the business to fully prosper. But unlike a customer, if a taxpayer is not satisfied, he or she can not simply switch products. Taxpayers will have to use what is available or leave town, a move that is difficult but more realistic with the increasing importance of transportation and the transferability of jobs.

Besides the basic importance of taxpayer accountability, involving the public is important because it is the law. According to the US Department of Transportation, federal legislation reflects the fact that "transportation investment decisions have far-reaching effects." As such, the federal government implemented laws that require federal, state, and metropolitan agencies to consider public input when making transportation plans. Among various regulations, agencies are required to "demonstrate explicit consideration and response to public input received during the planning and program development processes." The US Department of Transportation says transportation agencies should actively involve the public in accord with basic democratic principles: "In a democratic society, people have opportunities to debate issues, frame alternative solutions, and affect final decisions in ways that respect the roles of decision-makers."

### Professional surveys

The Houston Area Survey, random-digit-dialed telephone surveys that have system-

Growing frustration and demand for transit are seen in surveys



Harris County residents increasingly find that traffic is their biggest problem, and that transit is a very important solution. Source: Houston Area Survey.

City of Houston voters were asked whether they prefer to spend more taxpayer money on transit, even if it means less money for roads, or to spend more money on roads even if it means less for transit. Source: Blueprint Houston survey.

atically polled Harris County residents since 1982, clearly indicate Houstonians' growing concern about transportation and growing demand for public transit. The most recent survey, completed in 2003 by the survey's author, Rice University professor Dr. Stephen Klineberg, shows that traffic congestion now stands out as Houstonians' number one concern. In an open-ended question, respondents listed traffic congestion (33 percent) as Houston's biggest problem – significantly outnumbering the subsequent responses including the economy (25 percent) and crime (10 percent). That is a significant increase over the 1993 survey in which only 4 percent of respondents said traffic congestion was the most serious problem.

As mobility concerns mount, support for mass transit also climbs, albeit at a slower rate. This year, 52 percent said mass transit was very important to Houston's future, while 45 percent said it was very important in 1993.

If Houstonians see increasing value in transit, they see diminishing returns in road building. This year's survey showed that almost twice as many people (46 percent) prefer more public transit as the best long-term solution to traffic over more roads and highways (27 percent). The remaining respondents (24 percent) favor "developing communities where people can live closer to where they work and shop."

Public transportation preference even holds when linked to money and respondents are forced to make a choice. A telephone survey of City of Houston registered voters conducted in May, 2003, for Blueprint

Houston, a local non-partisan citizen group, found that 45 percent of respondents prefer to spend money on public transit, even if it means sacrificing road money. Transit, while the preferred solution, is not the only solution voters want however. A smaller 38 percent still prefer to spend money on roads, even if it means sacrificing transit money. As described later, this group of respondents was particularly significant because survey was designed to accurately represent the way Houstonians vote. Dr. Stephen Klineburg of Rice University and Dr. Richard Murray of the University of Houston completed the survey for Blueprint Houston.

Blueprint Houston, which attracted over 2,500 participants in just five months, is evidence of the demand for change at the grassroots level. The citizen group aims to get politicians to listen more attentively to the public and has voted on a "Citizens Agenda" for Houston. A recent meeting attracted over 1,000 participants on an early Saturday morning. The meeting resulted in a series of goals for the city in which participants voted on the number one most urgent goal for Houston: public transportation. The makeup of the event also closely represented the way Houstonians vote. Fifty-one percent of attendees were

Caucasian, 24 percent African-American, 11 percent Latino or Hispanic, 11 percent Asian, and 3 percent other. With the exception of the Asians (who make up 1.6 percent of voters), the ethnic make-up closely resembles Houston voters.

**Regional transportation plans**

Evidence of the disconnect also lies within government-mandated transportation studies. However, the public voice in these studies does not represent the larger public as accurately as the scientific surveys mentioned above. Hundreds of stakeholders who are losing their homes to road expansion and are moved to speak out at public meetings do not represent thousands using the roads to get to work every day. However, the federal government passed laws that require public involvement in transportation planning for several reasons. Among them is to keep in line with "basic democratic principles," that allow the stakeholders whose environments are affected to debate and come up with alternative solutions that affect final decisions. "Agency goals" should reflect "community goals," according to the US Department of Transportation. So while transportation officials and planners are not required by law to consider surveys, they are required by law to consider public involvement in these studies.

First, evidence of the disconnect between community goals and transportation plans can be seen at the overall regional transportation planning level in the update of the \$43 billion 2022 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP). The MTP is the most comprehensive transportation plan for the region.

Planned Lane Miles 2022			
	2000	2022	Increase
Freeway & Tollway	3,590	5,402	1,812
Arterials & Collectors	16,591	20,423	3,832
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,181</b>	<b>25,825</b>	<b>5,644</b>

Source: Houston-Galveston Area Council

The government-mandated public outreach included nine public meetings, a public opinion survey sent out to 60,000 Harris County residents, as well as email and letter correspondence. From all of that, a summary was made that concluded that there is “opposition to the financing of additional freeways and roadways as a solution to congestion problems.”

Yet that same plan is set to add 5,644 freeway, toll, and other lane-miles over the next 20 years. That would add enough concrete to build a lengthy road from New York to Los Angeles, from Los Angeles to Pensacola, and from Pensacola to Houston.

**Disconnect’s rising price tag**

The cost for such an imbalance of transportation supply and public demand is far from negligible. As Texas State Representative Mike Krusee (R – Round Rock) recently noted at the Texas Transportation Summit, right-of-way condemnations are no longer limited to inexpensive farmland; they now include condemning businesses, houses, and shopping malls.

The early estimate for the 5,644 lane-miles is set at \$11.2 billion. But if recent history says anything, those costs will likely increase. One project (expansion of the Katy Freeway) that just broke ground will provide less than two percent of the planned regional lane miles, yet will cost taxpayers at least \$1.71 billion. The project had an initial capital cost estimation of \$1 billion, so its costs have increased over 70 percent prior to major construction. This single expansion will take out 871 businesses, 72 houses, 122 multi-family housing units, and two non-profit organizations.

The purchase of those properties has proved costly not only to transportation agencies, but also to local communities. The small municipality affected the most (the City of Spring Valley) will lose 90 percent of its businesses and five percent of its homes. It has since announced plans to increase property taxes in part due to the significant loss of tax revenue from the highway expansion. With right-of-way costs not decreasing anytime soon, especially in the urban areas, the price tags for similar projects will likely grow more expensive.

**Transportation plans at the local level**

There is an indication that comments from the taxpayers might not even be read by government officials, much less considered, before decision

making in certain transportation plans at the local level. A case in point is the massive public involvement for the region’s most robust highway expansion – the Katy Freeway, a corridor that has seen some of the area’s strongest population and employment growth. It currently carries over twice the number of vehicles per day as it was designed to carry (280,000 vs. 120,000).

If there is a roadway in the region that would seem to merit more road space, it would be the Katy Freeway. Yet there has been enormous opposition to its significant expansion. Opponents of the Texas Department of Transportation’s (TxDOT) plan have formed a group called the Katy Corridor Coalition that has offered an alternative solution to TxDOT’s plan that minimizes expansion into private lands and is more transit oriented with reserved room for rail and priority retained for both transit and HOV.

However, the citizen group’s proposals have been overshadowed by a local governmental proposal. The Harris County Toll Road Authority recently proposed to revise the Katy Freeway expansion by assuming control of the four planned HOV/transit lanes to operate them primarily as toll lanes. Interested in the proposal, TxDOT conducted a new public outreach process on the proposed switch and other design features.

But before the public outreach comment period for the toll roads even ended, US Representative John Culberson (R-Houston) issued a press release announcing a signing ceremony for the toll road agreement, indicating that the powers that be at TxDOT and the Federal Highway Administration had already made up their minds.

This, despite the fact that comments against TxDOT’s plan with toll roads were still flowing. Out of the more than 300 comments received by the public comment deadline two days after the press release, 189 preferred the transit-oriented Katy Corridor Coalition plan to the TxDOT plan.

Only seven commentors expressed support for TxDOT’s proposal. Thirty-five commentors said they were frustrated with congestion and wanted the expansion to happen as soon as possible. The remaining commentors had various questions and/or concerns. Although 300 commentors might seem low, a TxDOT public outreach representative says it was abnormally high for the agency’s public involvement.

Many question whether or not changing the HOV lanes to toll lanes affects transit as the toll lanes will be “HOT” lanes, or lanes that will charge single-occupancy vehicles a fee and allow transit and high-occupancy vehicles to ride for free in certain circumstances. Whatever the case, the government’s actions imply that they were not seriously considering public input.

That press release was the “smoking gun” that proved the agencies “did not care about the public’s comments,” said Jim Blackburn, a lawyer suing the Federal Highway Administration for not following federal regulations that require the agency to seriously consider public input. He added that the apparent decision to implement the toll roads before the public comment period was even over was essentially unconstitutional as it precluded the public’s rights to due process. But Representative Culberson defended his press release, insisting that it didn’t mean TxDOT couldn’t seriously consider public comments, and discounted the importance of the toll road agreement.

Other studies have shown a steady progression of opposition. Initially, the first Katy Freeway study, the 1997 Major Investment Study that looked at several mobility alternatives, indicated mixed feelings by the public – some wanted more lane miles, some more transit. The study indicated no overall sentiment. But as the plan solidified into a large road expansion that stripped realistic rail options and reduced transit priority and HOV access from two-person vehicles to three-

**Was the public ignored?**

MARCH 2003				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10 Press release announcing toll road agreement Public comment period ongoing	11 Public comment period ongoing	12 Public comment period ends	13	14 Toll road agreement officially signed

*Did elected representatives and transportation officials jump the gun when they agreed to announce the signing of a document okaying the addition of toll roads to the Katy Freeway before the public comment period was over?*

person vehicles, the public protested. TxDOT's next study, the 2001 Environmental Impact Statement, cited more negative public complaints than positive comments supporting the project. Finally, the last study that switched HOV lanes to toll lanes, as described earlier, resulted in the vast majority of commentators opposed to TxDOT's plan.

#### **Disconnect not universal**

It would be incorrect to say the road expansion projects lack supporters. The West Houston Association, a group that includes several of the area's real estate developers, highway contractors, and other businesses, is very much in support of the Katy Freeway expansion, which reaches out to yet undeveloped areas of Harris County. It also supports another large road project called the Grand Parkway (Houston's fourth outer loop) that would go through undeveloped areas. In addition, several residents along the Katy Freeway suffering the worst commutes of the state have been ready for any relief for some time and have vocalized their support for the project.

But these supporters fail to outnumber the opponents in both the surveys and the government mandated studies. Nevertheless, they appear to have the unwavering support of public officials that count some of these new lane miles as their top priorities. Representative Culberson, whose top PAC contributors include the National Auto Dealers Association, said he has worked closely with the West Houston Association on the expansion and has called the Katy Freeway expansion his "highest local legislative priority." Harris County Judge Robert Eckels, who is also chair of the regional transportation governance committee (Transportation Policy Council) and on the governing body for the Harris County Toll Road Authority, has offered to speed up the expansion by having Harris County take over control of the HOV lanes and turn them primarily into toll lanes. While Judge Eckels has said he is for transit including rail, he and Representative Culberson have been vocal opponents of METRO's transit plan, which is up for a vote this fall.

#### **An imperfect representative system**

The elected officials' decisions to support or not support certain projects might appear to be out of line with those they represent, given the trans-

## *Though transportation officials are required by law to consider public opinion, they are not required to follow it.*

portation studies and surveys. However, they are not necessarily out of line with their constituencies. First, while the professional surveys described earlier represent the general public, they (with the exception of Blueprint Houston's surveys) do not exactly represent voting populations. An elected official throwing support behind a particular transportation project realizes that while the majority of the population he or she represents might be against the project, the only majority that is of consequence to him or her on election day is the majority of those who vote. In Houston's case, it is the majority of just 35 percent of eligible voters. The fact that Congressman Culberson recently ran and won an election on a platform that supported the Katy Freeway expansion represents how separate survey and study populations are from voting populations.

"Polls and surveys are one thing, while active constituencies are quite another," says Glenn Gadbois of the Just Transportation Alliance, a Texas group organizing the public for more equitable transportation systems. In other words, if the majority opinion expressed by the entire constituency in polls and surveys does not match the majority of those likely to vote, it is unlikely the polls and surveys will do anything to sway public officials and their transportation decisions. Especially if transportation is not the only issue voters think about when completing their ballot.

While transportation officials are not required or moved to look at professional surveys, they are required by law to consider the feedback in the mandated public involvement. Yet there are also grounds for officials to ignore mandated public involvement. Oftentimes, the officials' defense as to why plans do not represent the majority opinion as expressed in the studies is that unlike professional surveys, these studies do not necessarily reflect majority opinion. And though transportation officials are required by law to consider public opinion, they are not required to follow it.

So just as some professional surveys may not

necessarily reflect the opinions of the voters, the public involvement in the mandated transportation plans do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the larger public or the voters. Both of these circumstances allow officials to devalue the importance of general public opinion. As a result, no matter how at odds public opinion is with actual transportation plans, the opinion means little if it is not the proven opinion of those who vote and consequently have the power to change leadership.

#### **Power brokering beyond political boundaries**

The disconnect is exacerbated by political representation that stretches beyond political boundaries. Neither the City's elected officials nor their constituents chose to prohibit Harris County's transit operator (METRO) from receiving federal funds for rail transportation. A US representative from a suburb in another county did that.

US representative Tom DeLay (R-Sugar Land) whose district is mostly outside of the METRO service area and Harris County, restricted METRO from receiving federal funding for rail transit unless Harris County's voters approved such a measure (such a restriction is the only one of its kind in federal transportation legislation). DeLay, whose second highest PAC contributors include the National Auto Dealers Association, admitted he is personally "not a big supporter of rail," and voiced opposition to spending federal money on the Main Street rail line because it would not help his suburban constituents' commuting times. "How would investing enormous amounts of their tax dollars in a light rail for Main Street help them?" he asked after blocking federal dollars. But those federal dollars he restricted from METRO did nothing to save his constituents' tax dollars – they paid the same tax regardless.

DeLay's restriction meant that the portion of the federal gas tax dedicated to transit projects like rail that might have come to Houston went instead to other cities such as Dallas. As a result,

*The public will have very little say, much less a vote, on a road project five times its size that will result in a property tax increase and a significant loss of homes and businesses in one city.*

all regional residents had to pay the same amount of federal gas tax but Harris County residents had to bear the full burden of rail costs with local monies and no federal help - and no ability to vote DeLay in or out of office.

Representative Culberson recently expanded DeLay's legislative rail restrictions on Houston by requiring certain ballot language. Unlike DeLay, however, Culberson's district lays entirely within the METRO service area. Nevertheless, his district's population represents less than a quarter of the METRO service area, but his actions will affect the entire Metro service area population.

Culberson's recent actions come at a time when polls show strong demand for rail transit. A recent poll showed that 61 percent think rail transit is a "vital" or "important" part of the region's comprehensive, long-range transportation solution. Only 14 percent said rail was "not important" or believe it "has no place" in the mobility debate. Those who favored more rail in Houston outnumbered those who opposed it two to one while a third of respondents are still undecided. The poll was conducted by the public policy centers at the University of Houston and Rice University among registered voters within the METRO service area.

Representative democracy operates under the premise that the public can affect change by electing representatives. When the public sees local decisions are being made outside their district, the disconnect is complicated by a demand that sees no way to influence supply.

#### **Selective democracy**

But could trends such as the ones promoted by DeLay and Culberson that require votes on transportation projects solve the disconnect between public opinion and transportation plans in Houston? Perhaps, but only if the voting is inclusive of all transportation modes. Road projects, as rail projects, do not have universal appeal or utility and their costs and opposition are growing. Culberson once pointed out that the Katy

Freeway is "the largest and most expensive transportation project in Texas history." Recent events that include controversial condemnations and property tax increases mean that the road expansion appeal particularly in urban areas is likely to worsen. It is unclear if the Katy Freeway proposal would pass if it were put to a county-wide vote, as rail is.

Voters had to go to the polls in November 2001 to continue building their first \$330 million light rail line that required no tax increase and no debt financing (it passed). However, they will have very little say, much less a vote, on a road project five times its size that will result in a property tax increase and a significant loss of homes and businesses in one city. Neither will they have a vote on the tens of billions to be spent on the thousands of new lane-miles that could have similar ramifications.

Many who support the federal funding restriction on rail argue that voters should have a say on where their one-cent transit tax goes (Currently one cent of the 8.25 cent sales tax in the METRO service area goes to METRO).

What about the other part of the sales tax that goes toward roads, or part of the property tax, the 20-cent state gas tax, and the 18 cent federal gas tax that residents pay that go toward road projects? All those who pay the sales, property, and gas taxes aren't necessarily endorsing road projects in various parts of the region.

So voting on both road and rail projects might seem like a way to reach a better equilibrium between public demand and government supply. But the resulting amount of voting would be extremely inefficient and could make democracy ineffectual. Even with all that voting, it is not clear that public votes are sufficient to sway officials. Houstonians voted for a rail system in 1988 only to see it canceled by a new mayor (and former Texas Highway Commissioner and land developer) Robert Lanier a few years later.

Requiring a vote on certain transportation projects and not on others (excluding those that require bond funding) could be deemed a preju-

diced form of democracy. However, the alternative of voting for every project might make democracy unworkable. For these very reasons, the representative system would seem to be the most efficient method to satisfy transportation demand. But for the system to be effective, constituents must be able to elect and affect change via their representatives.

#### **A road without checks and balances?**

While roads require significantly less public oversight than rail, toll roads have even fewer. Because toll roads are theoretically user-funded, they require no federal money or the public involvement regulations that go along with that money. As a result, the public voice concerning toll roads is almost entirely muted. Property owners not wanting to sell their land face condemnation. That is what has already happened along some of the most recent toll way expansions including Westpark and is currently happening along the Katy Freeway.

Even so, because toll roads are user-funded, some may argue, they do not need taxpayer oversight. One problem with that argument is that toll roads are not islands. Effects reach well beyond their user fees directly into the domain of business and residential private property. They directly affect residents' property values, health, and flooding. A preliminary study to build a toll road through the developed neighborhoods inside the urban area of Loop 610 and Memorial Park has already caused an outbreak of property owner and community resistance.

Another problem with that argument is that all taxpayers, including the non-users, may end up footing the bill. Due to a Harris County financial guarantee for lower interest rates, County taxpayers may end up paying for the toll roads should tolls collected not be sufficient.

With state and federal coffers less able to afford the increasing costs of both maintaining and building roads, locally funded toll roads take on increasing importance - especially in Houston. A bill passed in the last Texas State Legislature

allows state roads to be tolled and expanded using toll revenue. A bill in the US Congress would do the same thing with federal roads.

Legislators are also trying to ease condemnation laws that enable these road projects. The state legislature tried to modify condemnation laws to broaden the spectrum of courts allowed to conduct condemnation proceedings. The move, which passed the Senate but not the House, angered Harris County Court at Law Judge Gary Michael Block, who told the *Houston Chronicle* that the bill was "trying to rip off landowners in Harris County and not give them a shot at due process in court." The bill's author, State Senator and former Harris County Judge Jon Lindsey (R-Houston), told the newspaper that such legislation is necessary as property owners are being paid too much.

**The way we were**

But are public officials and planners pushing more roads only doing what was popular and effective not too long ago? It would appear so. Just two decades ago, public opinion was much different in Houston. Fast, growing, and innovative – Houston's highway system once defined not only the city itself, but its culture as well. More highways and roads often meant more room for bigger houses, bigger cars, and bigger businesses. The concrete solutions worked and surveys show that supply largely met demand. Dr. Klineberg's earlier surveys showed much less support for public transit than his 2003 survey. A 1983 referendum for heavy rail failed.

But Houston has changed. With the massive

*“At one point in the early 1990s, Houston alone was spending more on roads than any state except California”*  
 – *The Economist*

population growth, Houston has developed around its highways and no longer has endless land resources. Now, each additional sack of concrete is beginning to condemn the very businesses and housing it once promoted. It also carries flooding, air pollution, and even hotter temperature costs. Leaders today find that they are met with increasing resistance to the once simple solutions. Surveys and studies show that taxpayers are requesting more sophisticated solutions as they recognize the solution that seemed cheaper and faster at the outset may not be the most economical one in the end.

Houstonians are not the only ones noticing the mounting cost of more roads. “At one point in the early 1990s, Houston alone was spending more on roads than any state except California,” said one article in *The Economist* magazine that suggested Houston might have to change its ways in the future to have as much success as it has had in the past.

Transportation expenses are not limited to construction, however. Car purchases, insurance, financing, gas, lost work time, health costs, and other transportation expenses are often overlooked when making transportation policy. Hou-

stonians now drive more miles than anyone else in the nation and their transportation expenses are the third highest.

By 1988, Houstonians were ready for alternatives and voted for a fixed guideway transit system. As previously mentioned, their votes were essentially vetoed when a new mayor took over in 1991 and overturned the plan. The public has once again voiced its support for rail and bus in METRO's proposed long-term transit plan for which METRO claims to have conducted the largest transportation public involvement in Houston's history.

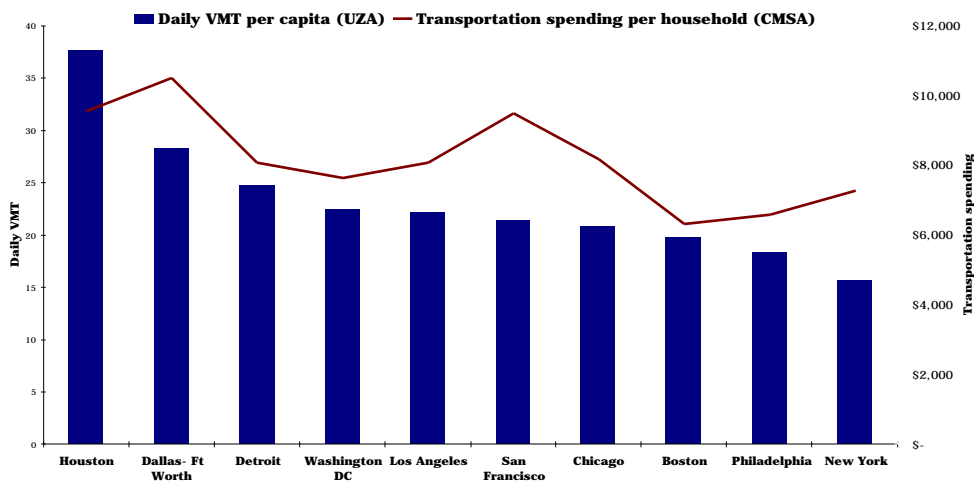
Whether that support is strong enough to stand the test of influential opponents will be determined this November when the public goes to the polls once again. As with any transportation project, benefits of METRO's transit projects are not ubiquitous for all residents or voters. While the polls and METRO's public outreach show taxpayers want more public transit, the real question is whether or not the voters do.

**Why are other cities so different?**

While Houston focused on road solutions over the past two decades, all other major US cities, including those very similar to Houston (Dallas, Atlanta, and Los Angeles), were investing in more diverse solutions, including rail. Why have these cities – especially those with characteristics similar to Houston's - evolved so differently? One reason could be that they are listening to their public.

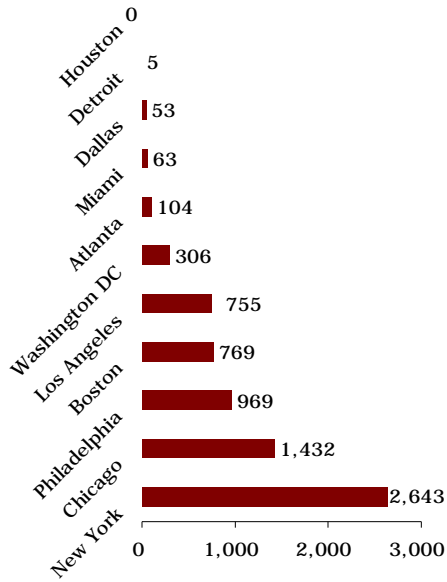
Atlanta's regional planning agency, for example, recently struck down a proposal to build a Grand Parkway-like toll road called the Northern Arc in their north metro area because of public opposition. Some of Los Angeles's public officials recently withdrew support for a Katy Freeway-like expansion (101 Freeway) also because of public opposition. Instead, both cities are investing in alternatives taxpayers say they are willing to spend their money on. Atlanta's regional transportation plan even includes an “Impact of Public Involvement” section that shows what has

**Paying more to drive more**



*Houston has the highest vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita and the third highest household transportation costs. Source: Surface Transportation Policy Project*

Miles of rail transit



Houston lags behind in transit rail, but not in vehicle miles traveled or household transportation spending. See previous chart. Source: Federal Transit Administration

changed as a result of public involvement. One of the agency’s goals is to “Enhance the impact of public involvement on transportation decision-making.” Houston’s regional plan has no such section or such goal.

Market barriers?

Transportation officials and planners are restricted from meeting public demands by a constrained set of resources. To some extent, funding biases against transit hamper public officials’ ability to meet transit demand. Transit money is not as easy to obtain as road money. In addition to the federal block on rail money to Houston, the federal government has historically given much more federal funds to roads than to transit, even after the supposed build-out of the federal highways system. Transit money is even harder to get at the state level. Until recently, TxDOT was prohibited from using state gas tax for public transit. Finally, a full quarter of METRO’s main revenue source – sales tax – is diverted to cities and Harris County that use much of it to build roads. During some years in the 90s, METRO was spending over 60 percent of its sales tax revenue on roads and bridges. All these factors make the relatively fast and easy toll roads in the midst of transportation crises look a lot more attractive to public officials.

But despite the apparent funding hurdles,

much more money is there for the taking. The federal government has been allowing more and more of its dollars to go to transit in the form of “flexible funds” or funds that may go to either transit or roads. Atlanta plans to flex enough road money to spend about half of all of its transportation funds on transit over the next two decades (not including HOV lanes, bikes, and pedestrian facilities which amount to another 14 percent). According to the 2022 Metropolitan Transportation Plan, the Houston region plans to spend about a third of its funds on transit (inclusive of HOV lanes but not pedestrian and bike facilities which add less than one percent)\*. Houston could use more of its “highway dollars” on transit, but to do this, it needs transit projects to spend the money on. The 2022 plan does not have the entire METRO Solutions plan that includes rail. Voters must approve it this fall before planners can get funding for it.

Using 100 percent of transit revenue for transit projects would greatly enhance its feasibility. By the time METRO is expected to start receiving all of its sales tax revenue in 2014, it will have lost roughly \$2 billion of its funds to local roads and bridges and with it \$2 billion of federal matching dollars, or together enough to pay for almost the entire rail system expansion.

Dedicating a portion of road tolls to transit could also help relieve the financial drag on METRO. Both San Diego and London have received world-wide accolades for their congestion pricing techniques in which users pay a fee for superior service at high-demand times. Both projects allow transit free use of the lanes and donate part of the toll revenue to transit, which has resulted in shorter commuting times for drivers and more money for transit. By investing part of the congestion pricing revenue in transit, those cities have overcome social equity criticisms often attached to such projects, which are often criticized for providing “Lexus Lanes,” or good service only to those who can afford it. While set to allow transit to roam free along its tollways, in certain circumstances, Harris County Toll Road Authority currently is prevented from distributing its excess revenue to METRO but could make modifications to do so in the future.

\* The 2002 update of this plan showed a transit share increase to 40 percent, however, details behind this number, including whether or not it included HOV lanes, were not answered by the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

Finding equilibrium

Transportation is Houstonians’ top concern for the fourth year running. With trends that show increasing road congestion and transportation costs, worries about transportation are unlikely to wane. Through surveys and public involvement, the public has voiced a preference for transit as the best way to address mobility. The other and once more popular approach, road expansion, is increasingly garnering public opposition as its effects may now go beyond vacant land into established neighborhoods.

However, the public’s collective voice in these public surveys and plans has been somewhat marginalized by political representation that leaves some voters powerless and a selective transportation democracy that prejudices against some transportation projects. The public voice is heard hardly at all when it comes to toll roads, which are an increasing trend in Houston and require no public involvement.

The public voice that matters most comes from those who vote. The effort to push transportation decisions down to a vote might seem like a way to help solve the disconnect except that the voting system favors one mode over another. Even with a mode-neutral system, such an amount of voting would seem to make democracy impractical.

Officials are limited in meeting public demand to some extent by financial resources that are more abundant for roads than for transit. Even so, increased funding flexibility at both the federal and state level means that officials have more resources than ever before. At the local level, user-fee projects such as congestion pricing could help make the system more efficient and generate more money for transit as they have in other cities. But local officials would have to make shifts in policy that now requires that revenue to be restricted to roads.

This fall, taxpayers will voice their opinions during public involvement for the regional transportation plan update (RTP 2025) and at the polls in November when they vote for a new Houston Mayor and Council Members, and a METRO-area transit referendum. Should voters approve the transit referendum, US Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) has indicated her intention to “make sure Houston METRO gets its fair share of federal funding.”

There are signs of increased attention to pub-

lic involvement in recent transportation planning. The plan for the next big highway project in Houston, the 290 corridor, thus far includes reserved room for high capacity transit, indicating officials might be listening to the public. But the 290 project is just a drop in the bucket in terms of all the projects in the region. After another round of public involvement for the RTP and other plans this fall, officials will have the opportunity to further modify future projects to come closer to community priorities. After such involvement, they could, like Atlanta's regional planners, have an "Impact of Public Involvement" category in their plans that show specifically what decisions were made because of public involvement.

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