

How many jobs are in your opportunity zone?

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How we measure various aspects of our regional growth has a tremendous impact on the quality of life for Houstonians. By State mandate, we are required to reduce emissions of the precursors of ozone to improve our air quality and reduce the health impacts for the humans living in our region. The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) illustrates in the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) that we will be on target for going below the State mandated levels of NO_x and VOC's over the next several years and will actually go significantly below these levels. This action should actually reduce the number of people in our region who suffer from asthma and other respiratory problems. The lower the target, the more relief.

In his Policy Framework appendix to Joel Kotkin's "Opportunity Urbanism" Tory Gattis suggests we measure "the opportunity zone" for either an individual seeking work, shopping, and schools, or a business seeking customers and employees, by measuring how far one can travel in a certain amount of time. This is an interesting measure of an urban area and its transportation infrastructure that was used in the 2025 RTP and appears in the System Analysis section of the 2035 RTP. As shown in the maps to the right, this concept is a measure of mobility, how far you can drive in a certain period of time. In these maps each red ring represents a half hour drive further from the center.

While this is an interesting measure and has successfully been used to focus our transportation spending on maintaining the pace of road building so that we can continue to drive the same distance in half an hour, it does not accurately reflect our "opportunity zones." When Gattis speaks of access to jobs and restaurants, the focus is not on how far you can drive, but how many people you can interact with in a reasonable amount of time. To measure the breadth of "opportunity zones" within our region, we could take this one step further and develop a different model that measures how many people are within your thirty-minute travel zone, or how many jobs. It might take a good amount of computing power, but H-GAC could measure this data point across the region, yielding the true "opportunity zone" measure for every point in the region.

The benefit of this new measure is that it would not bias road building as a policy alternative like the old measure does. Instead it would actually measure the intended economic development goal that Gattis correctly notes as a reasonable objective of local government. Dense transit oriented development provides more opportunities for those living near it, but this would not be captured by the old measure. Measuring access in the new way will also allow us to compare the Livable Centers program to other transportation infrastructure investments. Interestingly, the new measure would also capture the same benefits of road building that the old measure captures alongside density and transit.

Also, this new measure of "opportunity zones" across our region will not be focused solely on downtown like the previous measure. Houston is distinguished among American cities in that for a long time it has developed as a polycentric region instead of the simple downtown and surrounding suburbs model that is assumed in many urban planning discussions. In terms of jobs, Uptown is the largest "satellite city" in America and we have several other downtowns, including the Med Center and Greenway that are larger than downtown Miami or San Diego. Our measures and our transportation infrastructure should recognize the importance of our many existing Livable Centers.

For more information on the 2035 RTP, see <http://www.gulfcoastinstitute.org/2035rtp>.

Tory Gattis' Policy Framework Appendix is available at:
<http://www.houston.org/events/kotkin/>

2035 RTP Travel Time Contours to CBD

Figure 7 - 2005



2035 RTP



2035 No Build



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