

Thursday, April 15, 2004

The draft 2025 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) created by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) is the largest, long-term transportation plan for the Houston area. The plan is available at www.2025plan.org. To help increase understanding of the plan the Gulf Coast Institute will publish a series of educational bulletins. For other transportation bulletins about the RTP, visit www.livablehouston.org

A disconnect between taxpayers and tax spenders

Last year, a poll of Harris County residents¹ found 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). However, projects proposed by local governments and H-GAC fall out quite differently than the public suggests. Roads make up 73 percent of total projects while transit makes up 27 percent of total projects over the next two decades. Harris County residents make up roughly three-quarters of all the people living and working in the region covered by the RTP.

Houston's transportation choice problem

A national transportation study² cited in the RTP found that Houstonians have fewer options than citizens in other metro areas of similar size. Transportation choice was measured using the supply of public transportation available compared to the supply of roadways available. The study found that Houston's supply of roadways dwarfed its supply of transit. Houston's transportation choice ratio (.96) ranked significantly lower than that in Dallas (1.21), Atlanta (1.35), Los Angeles (1.22), Philadelphia (1.94), and Washington DC (2.69), among others (higher numbers mean more choice). Despite this and the public's apparent desire for more choice as noted in the RTP's public involvement section and in other public surveys, giving residents more choice is not a major goal of the RTP.

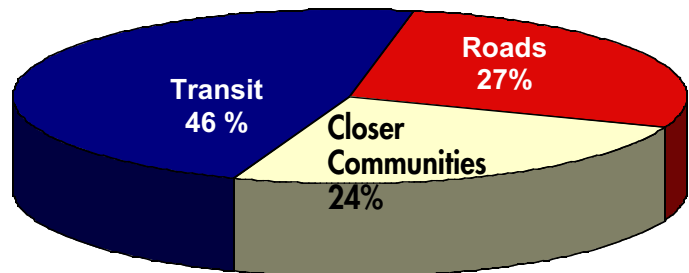
More transportation choice equals less waiting

"In places with more transit service, a smaller portion of the population drives to work each day, lowering overall exposure to congested conditions," concluded a report by a national transportation research nonprofit. They found that the lower an area's transportation choice, the more the area's residents have to fight congestion. "In places with more choices, more people can choose whether to fight through congestion in their cars or avoid it by using less stressful ways to get to work," the report said².

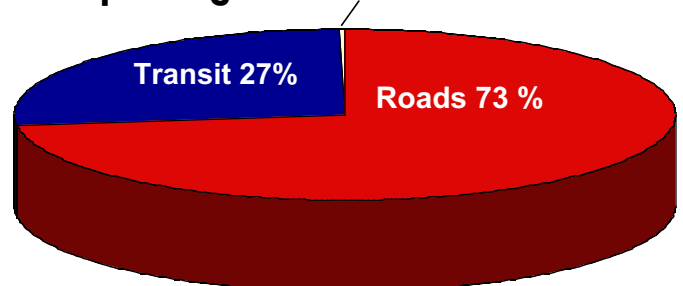
Public process calls for "alternatives"

In summarizing the public participation process, the 2025 RTP draft says "Many of the public comments received were focused on the need to provide more travel choices. The public also indicated a desire to promote transportation alternatives that have more positive environmental (air and water) impacts than those associated with major roadway/freeway expansion." The RTP, as seen in the lower graph (right, above) proposes that 73 percent of projects be for roadways.

Survey: public prefers more transit



RTP Spending



The graphs above show that Harris County residents (top) think transit is the best solution to mobility problems, with the number favoring roads about half that. The 2025 RTP (bottom) gives 73 percent to road projects, 27 percent to transit.

RTP question:

Which transportation goal is more realistic: reducing congestion or improving mobility choice? According to the Texas Transportation Institute no major city is successfully ridding itself of congestion. In fact, "Measures in all of the population size categories show more severe congestion that lasts a longer period of time and affects more of the transportation network in 2001 than in 1982." But more and more cities are succeeding in offering alternatives to road congestion via more transit. And those cities' residents are responding. Over the same time period, passenger miles of travel on transit systems has increased 100 Percent, even more than the increase on freeways and major streets (91 percent). Nevertheless, it is reducing congestion, not providing options, that is a major goal of the RTP³.

Sources

1. Klineberg, Stephen H., "Houston Area Survey," 1982-present. <http://www.houstonareasurvey.org>
2. Surface Transportation Policy Project, "Easing the Burden: A Companion analysis of the Texas Transportation Institute's Congestion Study, May 2001. <http://www.transact.org/report.asp?id=185>
3. Texas Transportation Institute, "2003 Urban Mobility Report," September 2003. <http://mobility.tamu.edu>