



Wednesday, May 12, 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

H-GAC proposes \$13 billion in road projects

The major addition to the Regional Transportation Plan 2025 (RTP 2025) is the more than \$13 billion worth of added road capacity projects added to the plan by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC). Their projects amount to more than twice the cost of added-capacity rail and bus projects approved by voters last fall in the Metro Solutions referendum¹. H-GAC has never taken such a significant role in proposing projects.

The 100 Percent Plans

The H-GAC projects came from a study performed at the request of the Transportation Policy Council Chairman (Harris County Judge Robert Eckels). The study, known as the "100 Percent Plan," resulted in billions of dollars of recommended road projects to be funded over the next 23 years. The 100 Percent Plan was a "demand analysis" that analyzed how the region could mitigate congestion by adding and expanding roadways beyond what local authorities are recommending. Another study, the "100 Percent Transit Plan," looked at how the region could use transit beyond Metro's plan, which was approved by voters last fall. From the documents available, it appears that almost all of the road projects in the 100 Percent Plan made the funding cut for the current RTP - but none of the transit projects made the list. To see a chart of all of the projects recommended by H-GAC, including those outside of the 100 Percent Plan, see the chart at right, above.

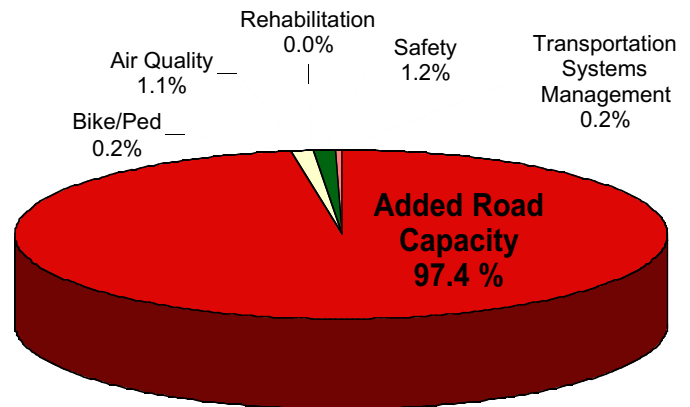
Who pays for the H-GAC projects?

All projects ultimately need local sponsors, usually an agency such as the City of Houston, Harris County, Sugar Land, or many others. Local sponsors must provide a share of the money for the projects in order to receive federal and state funding. But the \$13 billion in H-GAC added-capacity projects have few local sponsors, and even as those come forward, it is unclear where the local match would come from for these projects, especially for those inside the City of Houston, which has been struggling with a large deficit.

RTP ambiguities

The current draft RTP states, "It is not the intent of the Houston-Galveston Area Council to suggest that the growth of future travel

How H-GAC would spend project money



The above chart shows that almost all of H-GAC's projects are road related. Of the \$14.2 billion in total H-GAC projects (currently listed in Appendix N of the RTP), about \$13.8 billion, or 97 percent, involve some type of added road capacity – either by expansion, new construction, and/or Express Street conversion. All of H-GAC's projects amount to almost half of the projects currently listed in the RTP².

demand can or should be accommodated solely through the expansion of existing or planned roadways." However, 97 percent of the projects H-GAC itself recommends for funding are roadway-related (see chart). The 100 Percent Plan that arrived at these projects looked at solving traffic congestion not with a variety of modes and land uses, but rather with roadway expansion.

Another ambiguity in the current RTP is H-GAC's statement, "The preliminary model results do, however, provide a starting place for the investigation of solutions that benefit as many as possible in a manner that fits community needs and expectations." It is unclear their projects will meet community needs as there were no community meetings and no local sponsors for H-GAC's road projects, and the summary of RTP public participations says citizens are looking for more balance in the transportation system. Further, there was no evaluation of fiscal, pollution, or right-of-way impacts to surrounding neighborhoods.

Disclosure

In the spirit of fair reporting, the Gulf Coast Institute should inform readers that it has recommended to H-GAC that it place its \$13 billion of additional road expansion projects resulting from the 100 Percent Plan on hold along with the 100 Percent Transit Plan projects until a more thorough and multi-modal study can be made with public input.

1. This comparison includes H-GAC's added-capacity projects and Metro's added-capacity projects. It does not include Operations & Maintenance or System Preservation.
2. Note that all of H-GAC's projects amount to 46 percent of the \$30 billion of RTP projects currently listed in Appendix N. However, it was recently discovered that Metro Solutions transit projects were left out of that published list. H-GAC revised percentage after taking these transit projects into account would likely be around 40 percent. Also, H-GAC projects are listed under "H-GAC" and "TBD" (this last classification because the projects will presumably have another sponsor at a later date).