



Friday, June 4, 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

New Regional Transportation Plan

H-GAC recently published revised versions of the RTP. While the wording of the document is different, it is unclear how substantially the actual projects have changed. The financial summary analysis chart that separates roads from transit (last page of the RTP) is almost exactly as it was before. However, the Appendix N Project Listing that lists all of the ground transportation projects has changed substantially. The major change in Appendix N is the adjusted transit number which now includes Metro Solutions (it was left out of the previous version). However, the other categories have also changed. Overall, the split between added roads and transit appears about the same: 73 percent roads and 27 percent transit. It is important to note that the H-GAC has different versions of the RTP and appendixes on different parts of its website. For the most recent version, visit <http://www.h-gac.com/HGAC/Departments/Transportation/RTP/default.htm> The www.2025plan.org site listed above only shows an older version.

Vote on the plan

The Transportation Policy Council will vote on the RTP this June 25th. To see their agenda, visit http://www.h-gac.com/HGAC/Departments/Transportation/Committees/TPC/2004_TPC_materials.htm#wbc_purpose=Basic

In light of the RTP vote at the end of the month, the Gulf Coast Institute has come up with a list of questions that we believe are necessary to answer before voting on the plan:

1. How does this plan compare to the last plan?
2. What are the real costs of roads?
3. Should H-GAC's \$13 billion road projects be included in the plan or in a separate study?

These questions are explored below.

How does this plan compare to the last plan?

The RTP is updated every three years. In order to see if the plan is advancing the area's long term goals (as the federal government requires) and in order to track the plan's performance, GCI believes the public and public officials deserve accurate, historical information for rational decision making. However, there is no financial comparison to how expenditures have changed from the last plan. Moreover, the Institute has discovered it might be impossible to do such a comparison with the current numbers.

The Institute compared the current plan against the previous plan (MTP 2022) and found that overall expenditures have increased 57 percent, transit has decreased 12 percent, and roadways have increased 121 percent. However, H-GAC staff has said that significant accounting errors in the 2022 plan prevent the two versions from being accurately compared. The last plan apparently overstated transit and understated roads, partly due to misreporting by transportation agencies. The Institute has requested revised 2022 numbers

for an apple-to-apple comparison and has been told that these are not available.

What are the real costs of roads?

The Institute believes the RTP 2025 plan could be underestimating road costs as they relate to right-of-way costs (the costs to acquire land, businesses, and homes for road expansion). Right-of-way costs are not described in the plan, even though the RTP includes a 60 percent expansion of roadways. The Institute has requested figures for right of way costs but H-GAC has responded that an overall figure is not available for two reasons: One, some regional agencies account for right-of-way in such a way that its costs can not be broken out for the RTP projects, and two, sometimes right-of-way is not fully studied until later in the planning process. For a plan that centers around very aggressive road expansion, it is unclear how officials can determine whether or not it meets the federal law that requires included projects have sufficient revenue without knowing the full extent of the costs.

Should H-GAC's \$13 billion road projects be included in the plan or in a separate study?

The major new part of the RTP is H-GAC's "100 Percent Plans," which were studies that sought to satisfy transportation demand without considering financial or physical constraints. Out of those studies, called "100 Percent Plan" and "100 Percent Transit Plan," H-GAC identified approximately \$30 billion of additional road and transit projects that could benefit the region. The agency has clearly communicated the need for more financial, physical, and benefit analysis for both transit and road projects before these can be carried forward. Indeed there has been no "on site" analysis of the projects, no analysis of quality of life impacts to surrounding neighborhoods, no analysis of tax-base implications, and no alternatives analysis (such as replacing new road projects with transit).

However, H-GAC recommended \$13 billion worth of road projects and \$0 of transit projects be placed in the actual RTP financially constrained plan, meaning those road projects now have a much higher priority than the transit projects in terms of funding and feasibility. H-GAC said it gave the road projects higher priority because "Metro has no more money for additional transit projects," but at the same time, H-GAC has said it is not sure if there is enough money from other transportation agencies for H-GAC's recommended road projects. The Institute wonders why the road projects, which need much further study, as do the transit projects, were not tabled with the transit projects for further analysis. *Note: the Institute, in its comments to H-GAC on the plan, has recommended that H-GAC's projects be moved out of the RTP and into an appendix for more study, along with the appendix about unfunded transit possibilities. To read the Institute's complete comments, go to <http://www.livablehouston.org> and click on the Houston Transportation Bulletin section. The comments are near the top of the Bulletin pages.*