

Houston, We Have a Plan

The City of Houston has an opportunity to fundamentally enhance its approach to planning and foster a healthier, happier and more prosperous Houston community.

What is this opportunity? It is Plan Houston, which could soon become the City's first-ever City Council-adopted general plan.

Plan Houston is a framework around how the City provides services and supports Houstonians. At its core, Plan Houston is a statement of principles – community goals, and City strategies for achieving those goals – that are a starting point for effective decision-making. The plan was developed by the Houston community through a year-long process facilitated by the City of Houston.

As Steering Committee members that helped guide its development, we are pleased to express our support for Plan Houston. Our Committee includes representatives from the development and business communities, neighborhoods, academia, non-profits, and government. Key stakeholder groups, including organizations representing the development community and the City's Super Neighborhood Council, formally endorsed the plan as well.

Why do we support Plan Houston? Simply put, this plan will improve the City of Houston's ability to support the highest possible quality of life for everyone.

Plan Houston identifies 32 community goals and 12 "core strategies" for the City to achieve the goals. Each strategy includes more detailed actions for implementation.

Many of these strategies will seem obvious to the average citizen. We know, for example, that we need a City that maintains high-quality streets and drainage systems, builds exemplary parks, and keeps us safe. Our City should also support responsible growth, nurture existing neighborhoods, assist education providers, and spend money wisely – among many other strategies for good governance.

Less obvious, however, are a number of significant gaps in the City's current policy and planning framework. The Plan Houston project evaluated these gaps, and the plan includes solutions addressing them. For example, clear and comprehensive policy is sorely needed in a variety of areas including housing, mobility, and economic development.

By adopting Plan Houston, the City of Houston creates a foundation for addressing these challenges. City staff and elected officials will be able point to Plan Houston as a basis for recommending projects that fulfill the strategies and support Houstonians. Consensus on goals and strategies can help improve coordination, encourage partnerships, identify efficiencies, and expedite implementation. Having these principles also helps focus City policy on desired community outcomes and encourages a more pro-active City organization.

In order for Plan Houston to be effective, however, it must be actively used by the City organization. Plan Houston needs to be integrated into routine city function, ensuring City endeavors align with the goals and strategies described in the plan.

One area in which Plan Houston can provide particular benefit is in the prioritization, budgeting, and monitoring of policy and planning projects. The City is constantly revising ordinances, updating parks or bicycle master plans, conducting feasibility studies, or pursuing other similar efforts. The City needs improved, transparent mechanisms to ensure these projects align with community goals, are coordinated among departments, and receive adequate input from stakeholders and City Council.

One approach for such a mechanism is the development of an annual work plan for the City. Similar to how the City's Capital Improvement Program identifies capital projects, the annual work plan would identify major projects relating to policy and planning, focused on the upcoming fiscal year. A major benefit of a formal work plan is greater opportunity for all parties to engage in planning and policy-making. Further, an annual work plan would institutionalize transparency and interdepartmental coordination.

Once developed, the proposed work plan would be confirmed through the annual budget process and updated periodically. In this way, Plan Houston creates a framework for decision-making while providing flexibility to determine what projects to focus on next. This approach is used by other cities, and the Steering Committee urges Houston to adopt it.

Whatever the approach, we strongly encourage the City, including current and future mayors and council members, to embrace and implement Plan Houston. A significant commitment is necessary to ensure the City develops the ongoing internal processes necessary to implement the plan. We hope to see this commitment from our elected officials and City departments.

Houston continues to grow, and our resources are increasingly stretched to provide the services so important to our region's success. Our City cannot afford to be uncoordinated, reactive, and inefficient. We encourage City Council to adopt Plan Houston and create a lasting legacy of better governance for our city.

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