

MARLENE L. GAFRICK
Director, City of Houston Planning and Development Department

Comments 8-26-06- Urban Corridors Workshop

Good morning and welcome to the first in a series of events where we will be working together to plan for the future of Houston's urban neighborhoods. My name is Marlene Gafrick and I'm the Director of the City of Houston's Planning and Development Department. Thank you for taking time out of your Saturday morning to join us here at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

I'd like to thank three sponsors who have helped the Planning Department make today's event possible; the City of Houston's Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department for the use of the George R. Brown Convention Center, Central Houston and Aramark.

Houston, the city we all call home, continues to undergo dramatic growth and redevelopment. You see it as you drive through your neighborhood and on the way to work - new houses, redeveloped properties, expanding businesses, and more traffic. The result can be a significant change in the fabric of our existing neighborhoods, sometimes for better, sometimes not. This is particularly noticeable in the urban neighborhoods of the inner city and it is projected to continue into the foreseeable future.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council recently completed their Regional Growth Forecast which looks at population and employment projections through 2035 for the purpose of transportation and community planning. Their projections are in line with those done by other entities.

The 8-county region will see a population increase in the next 30 years of more than 3.5 million people with more than 2 million of that concentrated in Harris County. That's the equivalent of adding a second Houston to Harris County in the next 30 years. These 2 million new people will form an additional 835,000 households and they will add more than 1 million new jobs to our economy – a real benefit to us all. Our total population will reach 8,835,000 in the region with 5,840,000 in Harris County alone.

Houston is a young city and we have seen great spurts of growth in our past. We've learned there are three ways we can respond to growth. We can choose to *ignore it* and be driven along on its tide without direction. We can *fight it* and hope that its challenges are mysteriously diverted, a strategy that seldom works. Or, we can *harness the growth* and its opportunities to reshape our city and improve our quality of life. In Houston, we've shown that harnessing growth and change can reap big rewards.

Growing up always has its challenges. And when you're a big, spread-out city like we are, these challenges can be daunting. Our land area now encompasses 640 square miles – a huge area to serve. Let's put that into perspective. You can fit Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Miami, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, St. Louis and Washington, DC inside of our city limits and still have 18 square miles to spare.

A population comparison shows that the city populations of Atlanta, Sacramento, Boston, Orlando and Pittsburgh would all fit within our 2005 population of 2,016,582. When using other communities as examples, we need to keep this in mind.

Even with all of these people we still have plenty of room to fill in as a city. Approximately 25% of the available land within the city limits is undeveloped, and within the 610 loop about 17% is undeveloped. The inner city is already seeing a great deal of infill, leading to increases in property values and the creation higher-density development. This is a great opportunity for key parts of our community to mature.

Adding an additional 2 million people to our area is obviously going to put stress on services like police, fire and schools. It's going to challenge our water, sewer and drainage systems, our air quality and more. One of the biggest impacts will be on transportation. But this is also an area where some very interesting benefits can be derived as we look for opportunities to harness the growth.

We can grow in a manner that preserves the positive characteristics of our neighborhoods while improving the quality of life for current and future residents. We are here to discuss how our urban transit corridors can develop to achieve these goals because they are crucial to our future. We're going to ask some critical questions about the change and growth to come. What should it look like? Will it harm or help existing areas? What do we want to preserve and protect? What do we want to change or recreate? Together, let's take a proactive look at our future.