

# The METRO Regional Plan 1985



*The median bus/van lane in the North Freeway (I-45) carried as many passengers as automobiles in three adjacent freeway lanes in peak periods (Photos by Paul Hester)*

## Jeffrey Karl Ochsner

In 1986, voters in Houston and west Harris County again will have the opportunity to determine the future of public transportation in Houston. At that time they will be asked to approve bonds, to be issued against future sales-tax revenues (the tax already being in place), to aid in the construction of a regional transit system consisting of a mix of busway and rail technologies. This regional plan, developed by the METRO board in June 1985, after nine months of publicity and community involvement regarding transit options, may be Houston's last chance to address major regional transportation problems and to develop a modern, convenient, balanced regional transportation network. It may also be Houston's last chance to take the necessary steps to create a regional transportation system so necessary to support the on-going campaign for economic development and diversification.

### Some History

Public operation of transit services in Houston was not initiated until 1974 (after the failure of the HARTA transit referendum), when the City of Houston took over the assets of the virtually bankrupt, private bus company Rapid Transit Lines. Through the next five years, the city managed to keep transit in operation, but made no significant improvements in the system and did not attempt to expand service beyond the area covered by the private company even though the city was undergoing an incredible expansion. By 1978, with the system beginning to disintegrate, voters approved the creation of METRO, a regional transit authority supported by a one-cent sales tax, to operate public transit. METRO took over the city's bus operations on 1 January 1979 and began the task of creating a regional transit network.

The Interim METRO board, in 1978, had prepared a general plan of improvement which it presented to Harris County voters as part of the referendum campaign. This plan called for a range of improvements, from bus-service expansion, to creation of park-and-ride, vanpool, and paratransit services, to the eventual creation of a regional network of exclusive transitways. (The plan was developed to serve all of Harris County, but voters in the east portions of the county chose not to participate, thus reducing by about 25 percent the service area and the population covered by METRO. As a result, sales-tax revenues were proportionately lower than anticipated and capital expenditures also have been lower as a result of the smaller area to serve and smaller tax base.)

In its first years, METRO's service was, at best, barely adequate as it operated a system which had deteriorated under city ownership. Improved maintenance facilities, expanded park-and-ride lots, and other promised programs took time to plan, design, build, and place into operation. Not until 1981-1982 did service begin to improve significantly. Although METRO actually met or exceeded most of the 1978-plan goals by 1984 (especially when prorated for the smaller service area and population base), the problems in 1979 to 1981 had created an image problem which would take several years to overcome.

After many years of planning, METRO brought to the voters in 1983 a proposal for the first stage of a regional rapid (heavy) rail system to be built in the southwest and near-north areas. METRO's image problems and a well-funded opposition combined to convince voters that the proposed system offered too little service and cost too much money. A bond referendum to support the system was defeated in June 1983.



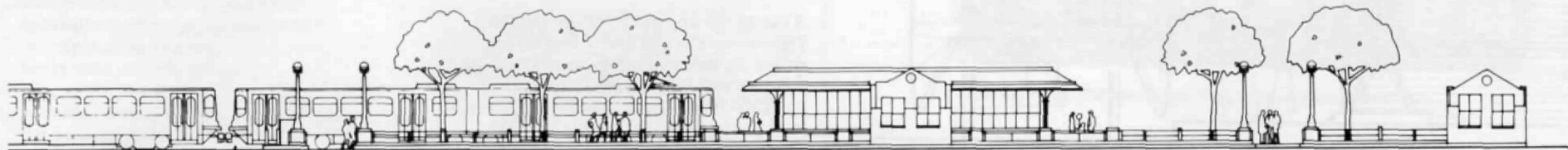
### Creating a New Transit Plan

The loss of the 1983 referendum was shattering. The rail-system design program was terminated, federal grants for the rail project were withdrawn, and the national perception became one that Houston might never solve its traffic problems.

The referendum failure also forced a total reassessment of METRO's approach to a regional transit plan. Previously, METRO had focused on a corridor-by-corridor approach and had tried to develop its plans independent of other government entities. Now the agency began to look at a total regional plan and joined in the creation of a joint governmental task force with the city, county, and state to consider coordinated approaches to resolving regional transportation problems. This joint task-force approach allowed sharing of base data and cross-checking of project plans, cost estimates, and the like. Although policy decisions might still be

made on an individual-agency basis, at least the data on which those decisions were based could be jointly verified. Finally, METRO initiated a program to solicit community views on improving transit service to learn what kind of transit plan the community wanted.

The result of this 15-month process was the development of a "generic" regional transit plan and three implementation options within the plan. The basis for the generic plan was a determination of the area requiring transit service and the identification of corridors in which service could be routed. The three options for implementation included Option A, involving only busways; Option B, a light-rail loop and radial busways; and Option C, light rail and some busways. In addition, an immediate action or five-year plan was developed which would be similar under all the options, with freeway median busways in five corridors.



Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership received a Progressive Architecture Design Award in 1984 for their work in developing the urban design and architecture of the Banfield Transitway in Portland, Oregon, scheduled to open in 1986 (Illustration courtesy of Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership)

**Presenting the Options**

In October 1984, METRO announced the regional plan and the three options and began a nine-month community-involvement campaign. In order to publicize the plan, METRO developed a newsprint tabloid that was distributed in the *Houston Post* and *Houston Chronicle*, prepared a small brochure that was mailed to every voter in the 1983 referendum (Spanish-language versions were also distributed), and initiated an extensive series of community meetings. From October 1984 to May 1985 approximately 250 meetings were held and over 8,000 citizens attended. The effort culminated in a series of 11 meetings attended by the full METRO board. These meetings offered an opportunity for citizens to speak directly to the METRO board, which had traveled to their sector of the city to present the regional plans and to hear public comment. METRO staff also met with many area associations and neighborhood groups in workshop-style meetings to try to focus on specific planning issues in particular areas. Overall, the program probably developed a higher level of response than any previous effort of this type in Harris County.

Through the tabloid, the brochures and the meetings, METRO also solicited written responses. About 4,200 responses were received and responders overwhelmingly favored Option C (82.3 percent), followed by Option A (8.9 percent), and Option B (5.1 percent). The responses favoring some sort of rail totaled almost 90 percent. Whether this was representative of the public-at-large was uncertain, but METRO analysis by geographic sector showed responses favoring Option C were the vast majority in every area. Option C was also endorsed by a number of area organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Central

Houston Inc., South Main Center Association, and Houston Northwest Chamber of Commerce. With all these responses collected, and after fact-finding trips to transit systems in North America and Europe, the METRO board went on an open retreat in mid June 1985, to discuss the development of a consensus regional transit plan.

**A Preliminary Consensus**

The board discussions while on retreat focused on all issues regarding a regional plan, particularly on population and employment (the major trip generators), appropriate transit corridors, ridership, and levels of service to various sectors of the METRO region. Some board members expressed skepticism about probable ridership on some suburban lines. Others focused on the issue of providing better service to the east and northeast - areas that currently produce heavy transit ridership.

Although no action was taken on retreat, the board achieved a general consensus on a direction for a regional plan. As a result, board chairman John King presented a resolution for approving a general approach to a regional plan at the METRO board meeting 27 June 1985. King stated that although he is normally satisfied with a 5-to-4 vote, he indicated that because of the significance of this resolution, he wanted it to be amended until it could receive unanimous support. After extended discussion and multiple amendments, the resolution passed 8-to-0 (with one board member absent).

As passed by the board, the resolution did not represent approval of a final regional plan, but it did offer the basis for a plan as it included the following elements:

- The Regional Transit Plan (the generic plan) has correctly identified the major regional transit corridors requiring trans-

port improvement.

- The Option C plan is the preferred transit option, but the interior rail loop is the highest priority section; radial suburban rail lines should be built only when justified by demand; and
- Service to the east, northeast, and southeast is to be redesigned and the possibility of grade-separating the entire rail loop is to be investigated.

As a result, a new map presenting the entirety of the new regional transit plan is not expected to be ready before fall. Indeed, METRO staff indicated that the study and design steps could take four to five months to complete. The possibility of a transit referendum was, therefore, deferred until 1986.

While it was disappointing to some not to achieve a full plan in June, the board action was nonetheless extremely significant. The board vote means that METRO has committed to beginning a new rail system. The choice of Option C, but with the priority on the inner loop, reflects the skepticism of some board members about suburban ridership. It also reflects a recognition that with METRO's existing and committed projects (five radial busways will be in operation by 1990) distribution within the multiple major activity centers - downtown, Greenway, Post Oak, and the Medical Center - will require an effective interconnecting system such as the loop will provide.

METRO staff are responding to the board direction with a variety of studies. In the northeast and east, the process is a continuation of the interactive planning of the past year. The results could even include additional rail. The most difficult issue appears to be the board request for an investigation of a fully grade-separated system. This appears to reflect the evident preference of chairman King for a highly

automated system. However, the cost of full grade-separation will be high, particularly when decisions regarding acceptable and unacceptable environmental impacts of grade-separated construction are faced. Indeed, given the probable reductions in federal support and the need to make limited transit funds stretch as far as possible, the board direction to study an expensive, fully grade-separated approach is quite surprising.

Overall, the board decisions must be regarded as positive. The idea of an all-busway system has been dropped and a commitment to a regional plan with a major rail component has been made.

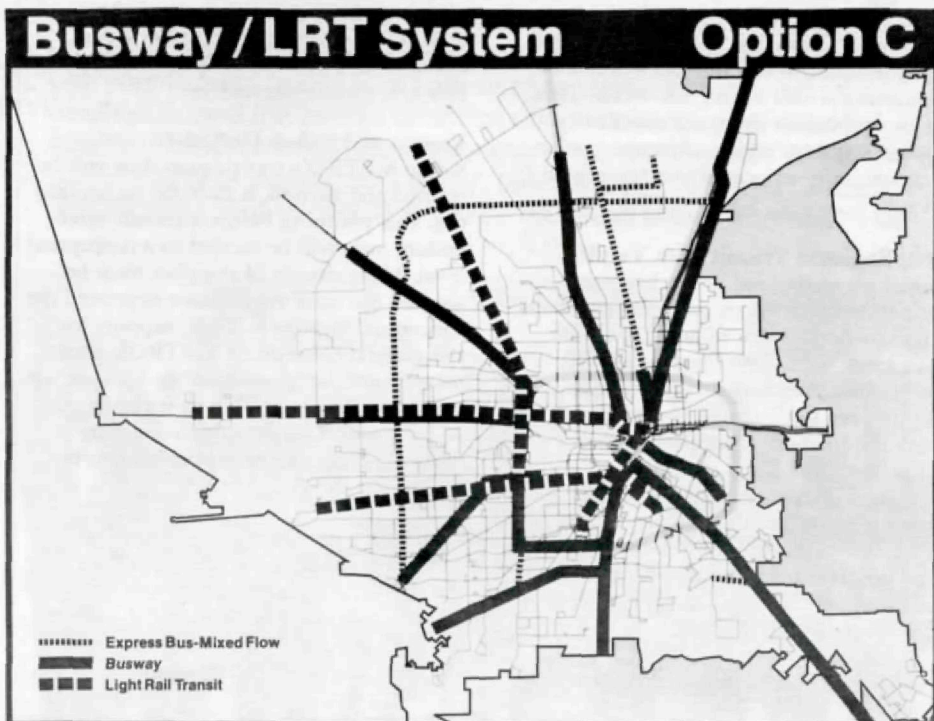
**Is the Regional Transit Plan Necessary?**

One argument is that no transit planning should be done - that if no plan is developed then action will be taken only on an incremental basis, if at all. Some argue that not planning transportation improvements will lead to spreading the concentrations of employment - that areas like downtown and Post Oak will stop growing and new employment will locate elsewhere. Another version of this argument holds that if no transportation improvements are built, people will be forced to live near where they work and a "sorting-out" process will occur which would reduce congestion.

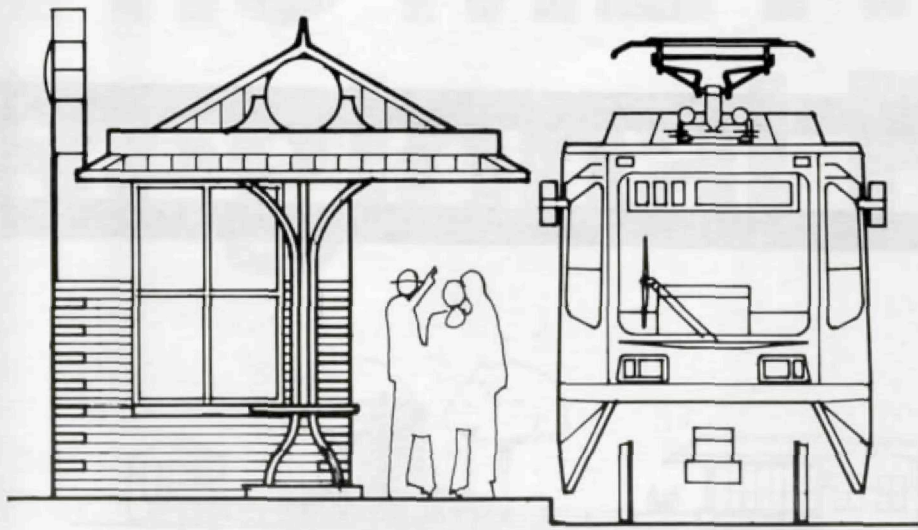
These arguments are largely irrelevant for several reasons. First, there is no "blank slate" on which a new transportation plan will be drawn. Plans already exist and guide the actions of various agencies. Highway plans, thoroughfare plans, utilities plans, flood-control plans, and so forth all shape the city. The key in planning improvements in any area should be coordination of these improvements. Furthermore, as the city, county, and state all have plans and independent funding, they will be building transporta-



The Regional Transit Plan shows the travel corridors linking the major activity centers and residential areas (Map courtesy of METRO)



The METRO board generally approved Option C, but determined that the inner loop should receive the highest priority (Map courtesy of METRO)



*A key to the approach for the Banfield Transitway was the use of traditional design elements to integrate the new system into the existing urban context of Portland (Illustration courtesy of Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership)*

tion and other improvements. The idea that not planning transit will halt construction of transportation or other improvements is simply false.

The idea that the failure to build transit improvements will lead to a radical restructuring of our city also defies common sense. The largest concentrations of employment (downtown, Post Oak, Greenway, Medical Center) are all projected to remain large, and grow even larger. Suburban centers (such as Park 10, Greenspoint, and Westchase) may emerge, but they will not suddenly displace the other centers. Too much is already invested in physical facilities and infrastructure improvements, so in any scenario of the future the major urban employment center will remain - these centers will be the focus of the major travel demand. Moreover, as the existing transportation network already forms a radial network favoring some locations over others (notably downtown and Post Oak), this will contribute to the additional growth of these centers. The existing major urban centers will remain the centers of the future Houston, no matter how large it grows.

Finally, the concept that a failure to build transportation improvements will force a "sorting out" is based on the false assumption that the primary motivation for choice of residence and employment is transportation and congestion. In fact, a range of factors such as housing, costs, neighborhood, schools, and natural features affect residential choices, and job availability, career opportunity, and the like are factors in job choice. Transportation from home to work and work to home is the cost that most people have chosen to pay to have freedom in making these other choices. Indeed, one could argue that a factor in the quality of life of a city may be the number of choices that are offered for those daily commuter trips. One also could argue that a factor in the creation of a tax-supported transit authority is a cost that voters have agreed to pay in order to enhance their freedom in choosing where to live and work. Thus, it is incumbent on the transit authority to propose a system which addresses public transportation services across the region it serves.

#### Is the Regional Transit Plan Valid?

Transit planners (and urban highway planners) tend to focus on commuter trips (home to work; work to home) because these generally follow fixed times and fixed routes. As a transit system must operate over fixed routes and on fixed schedules, its most appropriate market will be the same kinds of regular, repeated trips. As it is apparent that rush-hour commuter trips are the primary source of the worst congestion, then it is appropriate to offer a competitive transit alternative. Thus, transit planners should first focus on peak-period travel.

Given this basis for travel and the knowledge that the present concentrations of employment will remain the major employment centers in the region, it is possible to assess how well METRO has focused its Regional Plan. Generally, the METRO plan focuses on the major regional employment centers (downtown, Post Oak, Greenway, and Medical Center) and also provides service to outlying employment centers as well.

METRO's hardest task is serving residential neighborhoods as well as it serves the employment centers. Because Houston has such low-density residential areas, combined with the high-density employment centers, METRO proposes to combine a feeder bus network and extensive local bus service with the major corridor transitways. Thus, particularly in outlying areas, patrons will have the option of one day taking a bus to a rail station or busway or driving to a park-and-ride lot, then taking a bus or train. Initially, outlying patrons will receive only busway service.

Overall, the plan appears to offer a reasonable mix of service. Clearly, it will offer more convenient service to some than to others, depending on where one lives and works. Will it draw riders? The only evidence now is the local bus service (which is not a fair comparison because it is generally not time competitive with driving oneself, although it does demonstrate that there is a substantial "transportation-disadvantaged" population in Houston), and the park-and-ride service with the freeway median bus lanes on the North (I-45) and Katy (I-10) freeways. Currently, only the North Freeway lane goes far enough and has enough history to judge - METRO's surveys indicate that this lane alone carried as many passengers as the three adjacent freeway lanes operating in the peak direction in the peak hour. When offered a quality service, Houstonians apparently will forsake their cars. According to METRO the proposed system will offer a quality service and should beat driving times in congested peak-hour operations. Thus, the system should provide a workable alternative.

#### Transit and Urban Design

While METRO's transit plan now will be refined and revised, it must be recognized that this planning before a transit referendum only will be carried to a conceptual level. Many details of the plan must be worked out once voters have approved the conceptual approach. Thus, support for the general concepts in METRO's plan should not be construed as blanket approval of the entire plan as it finally may be proposed. Clearly, sensitive urban-design considerations will remain to be resolved.

One key to a successful transit system will be convenience - "putting transit in the middle of things." The ease of access from transit stations to workplaces will be critical to encourage ridership. For example, Post Oak Boulevard is clearly the center of the City Post Oak urban center. Ideally transit service should be right along this spine, but the future of Post Oak as one of the "great streets" of Houston will depend upon how the transit line is actually put into place. An elevated scheme is unacceptable and at-grade operations will have traffic problems, so a subway, though it will cost more initially, may be the best answer. Other sensitive areas include downtown; Main Street and midtown south of downtown; the South Main area with the Museum of Fine Arts, Hermann Park, Rice University, and the Medical Center; and the area around Texas Southern University and the University of Houston. In all areas, issues of cost will be raised, as the only environmentally acceptable solutions may be among the most expensive (particularly if a fully grade-separated system is proposed). But, there is no sense in building a cheap solution if it might cause deterioration to the area it serves.

Another urban-design impact not yet fully recognized is the impact transit will have on development planning. Much of the planning of new real-estate developments is based on how those developments will be served by transportation services of various types. The dense cluster pattern of development around transit stations in Toronto shows the impact transit can have. Even in Dallas, the expectancy of future DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) stations is having a similar impact. Some areas adjacent to future DART transit stations are already showing a much greater density of development, yet transit may not reach them for several

years. In Houston, should a system be approved, it could have a significant impact on development planning, particularly with a commitment to ultimate construction of rail in suburban corridors.

#### The Ultimate Issue

Each voter will determine whether he or she can support the proposed transit plan for Houston. The plan may not be the best theoretical plan that might ever be conceived, but, at this point, it is the result of an effort stretching over a period of more than two years. The plan will be a compromise - a solution balanced against concerns of individual citizens and groups, various transportation agencies, funding realities, and the like. Planning will have been carried to a conceptual level and alot more detailed design will occur before actual construction can begin.

In most cities, transit has been recognized as an essential part of a balanced transportation network: an essential service which a city provides to its citizens and an essential element in improving the quality of life of an urban area. As Houston enters the competition for economic growth and economic diversification, quality-of-life issues will play an increasingly important role. Demonstrating to potential new investors and others who may boost the Houston economy that the city is taking steps to build a balanced transportation system will be key. The competition - from San Diego, Atlanta, Dallas, and Austin - has already either implemented new transit systems or has approved regional light-rail transit plans. Houston has one last chance to compete. A balanced transportation system is an essential part of any strategy for the future of the Houston area and approval of the METRO plan will be a necessary step towards the creation of a balanced transportation system. ■



*Buses will remain an important part of Houston's transit system (Photo by Paul Hester)*