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**Power Moves: Houston, Texas and the Politics of Mobility, 1950-1985**

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**Power Moves: Houston, Texas and the Politics of Mobility, 1950-1985**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

To my family.

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# **Power Moves: Houston, Texas and the Politics of Mobility, 1950-1985**

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This dissertation argues that between 1950 and 1985 a diverse collection of residents from the Houston, Texas metropolitan area used debates about the planning, construction, and meaning of transportation structures—primarily highways and mass transit systems—as opportunities to claim political power and to influence the future of their neighborhoods and city. As they contested these systems, Houstonians articulated competing notions of the politics of mobility. In addition to concrete political decisions about transportation, this term also encompasses the daily transportation decisions of Houstonians and the meanings those residents ascribed to the infrastructure that carried them across the city. The politics of mobility uniquely illuminates the intersection of politics, culture, and urban development in Houston.

Who wielded the power to make choices about Houston’s transportation networks and how the balance of that power changed over time are central questions of this dissertation. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, a collection of nearly all white and male elected officials, professional planners, and private developers held immense power over the city’s decision-making process, but never completely controlled it. The actions

of citizens outside that group forced leaders to acknowledge, if rarely embrace, the perspectives that citizens held about transportation and the politics of mobility. By the mid-1970s, aided by changes in federal oversight and citizen participation regulations, as well as by their own assertions of political power, an increasingly diverse set of Houstonians—African American, ethnic Mexican, and white, urban and suburban, rich and poor—possessed more influence over the city’s transportation choices. By engaging in these debates, Houstonians challenged the city’s racial, economic, and decision-making status quo.

The choices made in Houston’s struggle over the placement of highways and the creation of a public transit authority sheds light onto the foundations of Houston’s unique built environment and offers a model for understanding similar forces at work in other auto-centric southern and western, “Sunbelt” cities, such as Los Angeles and Atlanta. Further, these conflicts illuminate why older cities in the Northeast and Midwest and younger ones in the West and the South developed such divergent urbanization patterns and transportation practices.

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## Introduction

Speaker after speaker rose to address the elected officials presiding over an April 1983 public forum at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Houston, Texas. The diverse collection of Houstonians in attendance came to weigh in on two pending transportation plans for Houston and Harris County. The first called for the construction of a countywide toll road system. The second would build a heavy rail mass transit network. Both systems planned to use an old rail corridor just blocks from the church for a route. Residents from this corridor, a mixture of white-collar and blue-collar African American, white, and Latino Houstonians, feared that the building of the projects would threaten their homes and daily lives.<sup>1</sup> Cognizant of the destruction caused by earlier road construction in neighborhoods throughout Houston, corridor residents preferred the rail option, believing it would be less disruptive and better serve their communities. One homeowner exclaimed, "We don't want the toll road to come in and uproot our homes for the benefit of just a few people. We don't want it to come in and devastate our community." Houstonians whose homes sat removed from proposed routes, including many white-collar, white suburbanites with long daily commutes, felt differently. These residents worried about their taxes going to support a system that would provide them with little service. Lee Swanson, one such suburbanite, campaigned for the toll roads

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<sup>1</sup> A note on the terminology used to label the racial identities of different Houstonians. White will be used throughout to describe Houstonians of European descent. Black and African American will be used interchangeably to describe Houstonians of African descent. Following the lead of several scholars, I will use ethnic Mexican to describe Houstonians who either have roots in or directly migrated from Mexico. Ethnic Mexicans dominated Houston's Latino population until the 1980s. Latino will be used when this dissertation discusses both ethnic Mexicans and Central American populations after 1980. For use of ethnic Mexican, see Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Maximilian Krochmal, "Labor, Civil Rights, and the Struggle for Democracy in Mid-Twentieth Century Texas" (Ph.D., Duke University, 2011).



arguing that they were the “best solution” for Houston’s traffic problems. Far from disrupting lives, Swanson maintained that the road would instead “tie the [metropolitan] community together.” As the hour grew later, patience grew thin. Citizens on both sides of the debate interrupted speakers with cheers and boos.<sup>2</sup> Houstonians came to the forum with competing understandings of community and through arguments about the proposals articulated those visions. The meeting changed few minds. The projects, framed by residents as either catastrophes or solutions, represented the latest iteration of a decades-long debate over the shape of the city.

The profound mix of anxiety and hope that Houstonians attached to the two potential modes of mobility hinted at the broader significance transportation structures assumed in the burgeoning metropolises of the American Southwest and West after 1950. Highways served as the primary purveyor of movement for these cities until the 1970s, when mass transit options reemerged after a postwar decline. This study frames Houstonians’ changing understandings and uses of these networks between 1950 and 1985 as central to Houston’s larger “politics of mobility.” More than simply concerned with decisions about transportation, this term encompasses the daily movements of Houstonians and the meanings those residents ascribed to the systems that carried them. It considers how access to or denial of mobility affected the lives of citizens in ways that went beyond just getting to jobs, schools, or stores. In totality, the term acknowledges that mobility could possess deeper, contradictory meanings for residents: freedom or oppression, modernity or backwardness, privilege or poverty. Through these meanings, it illuminates the intersection of politics, culture, and urban development in Houston.

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<sup>2</sup> *Northeast News*, April 26, 1983, Central Chancery Files (CCF), Archives of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, Houston, Texas (AAGH); “City Council Hearing on Hardy Toll Project Draws 300,” *North Freeway Leader*, April 28, 1983, CCF, AAGH.

More than anything else the politics of mobility revolves around power. Who wielded the power to make choices about Houston's transportation networks and how the balance of that power changed over time are central questions of this dissertation. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, a small, mostly white and male group of business leaders, elected officials, and developers dictated Houston's transportation choices. However, shifts in the city's economic and demographic makeup, political transformations caused by the end of segregation and the suburbanization, as well as Houstonians' divergent ideas about the form and function of the city's built environment all changed the tenor of debates around the politics of mobility. Non-elite citizens from across the metropolitan area began to question the planning power held by leaders. Houstonians whose neighborhoods absorbed the majority of costs of early highway construction demanded that the costs of future projects be spread evenly across the city. By engaging in such debates, Houstonians challenged the city's racial, economic, and decision-making status quo.

This dissertation argues that between 1950 and 1985 Houstonians used debates about the planning, construction, and meaning of transportation structures as opportunities to claim political power and to influence the future of their neighborhoods and city. As they contested the place of highways and mass transit systems within the Houston metropolitan area (HMA), Houstonians articulated competing notions of the politics of mobility.<sup>3</sup> These divisions arose during a period when Houstonians also contended with national historical events ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to the

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<sup>3</sup> Here, the Houston Metropolitan Area will be defined as consisting of Harris County and the six counties that border it, rather than attempting to follow the changing definitions of metropolitan areas as defined by the US Census Bureau and United State Office of Management and Budget. <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/>, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg\\_statpolicy](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg_statpolicy), last accessed December 10, 2013.

fiscal and political conservative turn of the 1980s. These larger events influenced Houstonians' transportation choices by altering the city's historically top-down decision-making process in ways that gave citizens greater say over the direction of Houston's development. This dissertation is the first study to devote its full focus to the investment citizens put into debating transportation structures and to argue that this determination influenced the shape of the political and built environments of Houston and other southwestern and western metropolises.

Houston makes an excellent subject for a study of the politics of mobility and its meaning to Americans because its rapidly expanding territorial footprint and its growing postwar population led officials to construct a transportation network dominated by highways. The city underwent immense change between 1950 and 1985. Its Cold War-centric economy, intimately tied to the petroleum industry and the space race, brought migrants to the city in droves. Over three decades, Harris County, of which Houston is the county seat, saw its population increase by 198 percent, expanding from 806,201 in 1950 to more than 2,409,547 in 1980. White Houstonians accounted for the raw majority, growing from 656,249 in 1950 to 1,701,711 in 1980, a 159 percent increase. But rates of growth among non-white populations were even higher. Latino Houstonians, predominantly of Mexican origin, rose by 275 percent, from 40,000 people in 1950 to more than 150,000 in 1980. The population of African Americans leapt by 250 percent, from 125,400 in 1950 to more than 440,000 in 1980. In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s the in-migration of Central American, Middle Eastern, and Asian immigrants increased the diversity of the city and county considerably.<sup>4</sup> In attempts to build a city

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<sup>4</sup> Arnolde De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 98; Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 23; Social Explorer, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), 1950 and 1980 Harris County Census, last accessed March 10, 2014; Stephen

that could accommodate this growth, officials constructed a transportation system that centered on the automobile. In 1950, the city possessed one highway, the Gulf Freeway, which ran between Houston and Galveston and put just over twenty-six miles of highway-standard roadways in Harris County. By 1985 the county had nearly 300 miles of highways, with an additional 200 miles planned. The jump in the number of registered vehicles from 306,870 in 1950 to 2,215,625 by 1985 showed that most Houstonians embraced the city's approach.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond reflecting the simple magnitude of growth in a highway-centric southwestern city after World War II, though, debates around Houston's transportation structures shed light on those that occurred in other cities such as Los Angeles and Atlanta. These conflicts illuminate differences in development between older cities of the Northeast and Midwest and younger ones in the West and the South, which led to these cities divergent physical forms and transportation practices. The construction of Houston's highway network also shows how postwar southern cities implemented spatial boundaries based on racial identities and economic class both before and after the end of legal segregation. These boundaries, combined with the weaker political position of African Americans and ethnic Mexicans prior to the 1960s, help explain why the environmental and cognitive costs of postwar economic and infrastructural development fell mostly, but not exclusively, onto poorer, communities of color. Finally, the city's diversification through immigration, the steadily increasing political power of African

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Klineberg and the Center for Houston's Future, "An Historical Overview of Immigration in Houston, Based on the Houston Area Survey," Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University, 2008, available at <http://kinder.rice.edu/reports/>, last accessed December 2, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Mileage total see Erik Slotboom, *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey* (Cincinnati, OH: C.J. Krehbiel, 2003); Houston Chamber of Commerce, "Houston Facts, 1965" H-Freeways-Gulf Freeway Vertical File (VF), Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC); Houston-Galveston Regional Transportation Study 1980, H-Traffic-1980-1984 VF, HMRC. On registrations, Houston Chamber of Commerce, "Motor Vehicle Registrations in Harris County, 1950-1984," H-Chamber of Commerce-Statistics VF, HMRC.

Americans and ethnic Mexicans from total disenfranchisement to full-fledged political participation, and the suburbanizing of a predominantly white population combined to make Houston's metropolitan politics incredibly complex. Houston's transportation debates occurred within this fraught context and exploring how Houstonians used debates about mobility to mediate racial, economic, and political divisions elucidates the changing nature of power and governance in urban America and can contribute to the cultivation of more inclusive decision-making in cities today.

## **HISTORIOGRAPHY**

This study builds on the definition of mobility proposed by geographer Timothy Cresswell, who conceptualizes the term as the combination of physical movement, representation, and practice.<sup>6</sup> To Cresswell, the particular combination of these three factors in a given time or place constitutes a specific “constellation of mobility” that touches on every element concerning a location's transportation system. Houston, then, possesses a unique “constellation,” one shaped by the specifics of Houstonians' movements through the city and by the meanings those residents ascribed to that movement. Cresswell's mobility encapsulates the actions of those moving, but his focus is not on the structures that allowed that movement to occur. Geographer J.B. Jackson argued that roads themselves warranted close study as simultaneously physical, cultural, and technological pieces of the landscape.<sup>7</sup> Echoing Jackson, Houston's roads and mass transit systems will be viewed as formative elements of the city's culture, politics, and urban structure. Linking Cresswell's observations about the act and significance of

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Cresswell, “Toward a Politics of Mobility,” in Mari Hvattum, Janike Kampevoll Larsen, Brita Brenna, and Beate Elvebakk, eds., *Routes, Roads and Landscapes* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 163-177.

<sup>7</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “Roads Belong in the Landscape,” in Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984).

mobility with those forwarded by Jackson about the role and meaning of physical infrastructure, this study shows that city residents consciously participated in defining both the act of moving and the systems that allowed it.

Most recent transportation historiography concentrates on national and state level policymaking; however, “Power Moves” takes up historian Paul Barrett’s call for historians to focus on local mobility practices and decision-making. The collection of works that have begun this task demonstrate that transportation debates represented important access points to civic power in many cities.<sup>8</sup> In their 2006 work, *Best Transportation System in the World*, Mark Rose, Paul Barrett, and Bruce Seely argue that the federal government stood as the most influential actor in American transportation history.<sup>9</sup> These authors and Raymond Mohl have also noted, though, that shifts in American transportation policy during and after the 1970s resulted in the federal government’s devolution of decision-making power to state and local actors in order to remove itself from controversial infrastructure fights.<sup>10</sup>

Other works have picked up Rose and Mohl’s later point by featuring local histories, but these have either relied on examples from numerous cities or focused on projects in specific historical periods. Because they do not make a longitudinal investigation of a single location, these studies do not adequately investigate the

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<sup>8</sup> For a review of some new works that fit this pattern see, Kyle Shelton, “Power, Governance, and Contested Mobilities: New Turns in United States Historiography,” *Mobility in History*, 5 (1), January 2014, 127-133. For a broader review of American mobility historiography see Michael Fein, “A Political Turn: Highways and Mass Transit in American Mobility History,” *Mobility in History*, 1 (1), 2009, 117-122; Paul S. Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Mark H. Rose, Paul S. Barrett, and Bruce E. Seely, *The Best Transportation System in the World: Railroads, Trucks, Airlines, and American Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Mark H. Rose and Raymond Mohl, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012.)

influence of local politics on national and state planning efforts.<sup>11</sup> By prioritizing Houston's transportation history over that of Texas or the United States and focusing on the actions of Houstonians rather than state or national actors, this study inverts the typical framework of transportation histories and builds a case for highlighting the significance and uniqueness of local iterations of broader transportation policy.

With that aim in mind, this project asks historians to see highways and mass transit systems as integral and contested elements of postwar cities, rather than only as utilitarian pieces of the built environment constructed to meet political demands or in reaction to broader societal shifts.<sup>12</sup> Several scholars have already shown how urban residents' active attempts to control the shape and use of the street in the early twentieth century connected to larger fights over urban space.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the sheer scale of postwar transportation structures made their construction and contestation an important element of fights over city planning, political power, and economic development. The influence the structures had on the lives of Houstonians went deeper than just shaping

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph F. DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2013); Alan A. Altshuler and David Luberhoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, Mass.: Brookings Institution Press; Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2003); Michael R. Fein, *Paving the Way: New York Road Building and the American State, 1880-1956* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Zachary M. Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Elihu Rubin, *Insuring the City: The Prudential Center and the Postwar Urban Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); Amy Debra Finstein, "Lofty Visions: The Architectural Intentions and Contrary Realities of Elevated Urban Highways in America, 1900-1959" (Ph.D., University of Virginia, 2009); Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012.); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2006). An important exception to these patterns is Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), which considers the cultural responses of citizens to freeway construction.

<sup>13</sup> Peter D. Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008); Brian Ladd, *Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit*.

such larger practices, though. The myriad components of Houston’s transportation network—overpasses, elevated freeways, train tracks, and bus yards—created consequences of divergent scales in the places where they were built. The destruction of a house for a roadway exacted a different toll than the running of a rail line run through an existing right-of-way. Documenting Houstonians’ responses to the proposed or actual presence of these structures gives a better sense of how elements of the built environment affected the daily lives of residents. Furthermore, investigating patterns in the placement of structures with the greatest negative consequences hints at how larger political and economic realities shaped choices about the built environment.

Historians Matthew Klinge and Hal Rothman adopt, in part, a deeper cultural approach to their studies of the built environment. In his work, Klinge calls for bringing an “ethic of place” to scholarship in order to clarify how former and current meanings of specific spaces converge. Similarly, Rothman shows that the emergence of a new economic, political or social force within a community—in his case tourism—could alter that place’s identity and create new “scripts” that allowed different economic and social opportunities to emerge.<sup>14</sup> My understanding of the concept of the politics of mobility picks up on Klinge and Rothman’s perspectives and offers a new narrative for studying the creation, meaning, and changing nature of urban space. The planning and building of roadways and mass transit systems altered Houstonians relationship to place by installing physical boundaries across the city and, at the same time, permitting movements that transgressed those borders. To contend with such changes Houstonians wrote new “scripts” for their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. While physical structures

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007); Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).



regimented space in particular ways, Houstonians use and contestation of those structures endlessly redefined their place in city.

Houston possesses a number of unique characteristics that differentiate it from both its Sunbelt peers and other American cities. While the city benefitted from many of the same forces that drove general postwar Sunbelt expansion—significant federal investment, low labor costs, and a business-friendly environment—it also displayed different growth patterns. Houston exercised greater autonomy in its annexation practices than almost any other American city. This ability, combined with the city’s famous lack of zoning, made Houston’s development and approach to transportation, unique.<sup>15</sup>

After World War II, as many scholars of the West and Southwest have shown, urban politics morphed into metropolitan politics. During this transition, transportation debates became a primary site of contention between central cities and their suburbs. Yet, most recent work on the suburb-city relationship has focused on metropolitan fragmentation, the rise of suburban conservatism, or tax revolts.<sup>16</sup> Houston’s specific city-suburb dynamic and urban metropolitan transportation in general, offer new ways to explore how cities and suburbs simultaneously grew together and apart during the second half of the twentieth century. Houston’s ability to avoid metropolitan fragmentation by

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<sup>15</sup> On characteristics of Sunbelt development, Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities*, Rev. ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); David R. Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Raymond Mohl, *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds. *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

absorbing growing areas before they could incorporate allowed city officials and residents to hold more power in metropolitan debates than counterparts in other major cities. This reality fostered a political balance in the HMA because neither city nor suburban populations possessed a large enough metropolitan majority to dictate terms to the other until the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Unlike other particularly fractious metropolitan debates, addressing transportation problems in Houston remained a bipartisan effort until the 1980s. Even as the Republican Party rose to prominence in the Houston suburbs and gained some strength within the city itself during the 1960s and 1970s, officials from both major parties remained committed to Houston's economic and physical growth and shared a general vision about how its transportation system could help achieve that goal. Only in the late 1970s and 1980s, when suburbanites pushed their representatives to campaign for more highways and resisted contributing tax revenue to cities to pay for mass transit systems, did partisan politics become directly linked with Houston's transportation debates.

Transportation networks likewise help clarify the connections and gaps between city and suburbs because they brought simultaneous proximity and distance to the relationship. Highways and mass transit tied suburbs and the city together by allowing commuters to reach downtown in shorter periods of time. Yet, for as much as these structures shrunk the time gap between central office buildings and suburban homes, they also lengthened the social, economic, and racial disconnects between Houstonians.

Highways helped construct physical and cognitive borders between groups by facilitating a process of mostly white suburbanization and, after the end of legal

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<sup>17</sup> Kyle Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited: Path-Dependent Annexation and Highway Practices in an American Metropolis," *Transfers: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Mobility History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 97–115.

segregation in 1964, by helping Houstonians mark discrete parts of the HMA as black, white, or ethnic Mexican, as rich or poor. Many scholars have shown that white urbanites responded to the falling away of race-based boundaries in the 1960s by re-inscribing separation through physical distance and economic exclusivity.<sup>18</sup> The compartmentalizing of Houston into areas understood to be home to residents of a particular racial group or income level magnified the stakes of infrastructure development. Because such spatial differentiation separated Houstonians physically and mentally from other areas of the city, it allowed Houstonians to vociferously defend their own communities and property values from damaging infrastructure projects, while at the same time they could support the construction of highways through the heart of a community a few miles away. Few saw reason to lament the destruction of neighborhoods so distant from their own. The political power held by various Houstonians also effected the routing of highways as officials most often ran roadways through areas of concentrated poverty or communities of color where they believed political resistance would be less formidable.

Defying officials' expectations, however, a diverse set of actors from across the city attempted to address the most pressing needs of their communities and participate in the governance of the city by challenging Houston's transportation decisions. Most scholarship on Sunbelt cities, including that of Harvey Molotch and Joe Logan, Sarah Elkind, Joe Feagin, and Amy Bridges continues to fixate on the choices made by officials

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<sup>18</sup> Self, *American Babylon*; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); David P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

and elites, while eliding those made by non-elites.<sup>19</sup> City leaders won many battles over growth and have rightfully been highlighted as central to urban power structures, but in no city did these groups come out winners in every conflict, nor did they operate in a vacuum. Neighborhood-level pushback by citizens in transportation debates, including that which was spurred by the civil rights and environmental justice movements, led to compromise and to some outright victories against the perceived powers of the city. Sociologist Robert Bullard and historian Eileen McGurty have shown how African Americans used a rhetoric of environmental justice and the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement to dispute the placement of damaging land-uses such as garbage incinerators within their communities.<sup>20</sup> These protests articulated a form of environmentalism quite different from the more mainstream iteration, which concentrated on large-scale ecological conservation.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, highways brought a number of problems to the neighborhoods they crossed. Not only did they mean immediate displacement for those in their path and a forced reshaping of neighbors' notions of place, but the traffic they carried also caused spikes in air and noise pollution and increased the likelihood and severity of pedestrian accidents. Houstonians took up fights against

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah S. Elkind, *How Local Politics Shape Federal Policy: Business, Power, and the Environment in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reforms in the Southwest* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston In Political-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Eileen Maura McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Scholars such as Richard Walker have placed these different iterations of environmental activism alongside one another, in order to see how their goals, focuses, and means combine and oppose one another. See Richard Walker, *The Country and the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

highways and other infrastructure to protest both their lack of input into their planning and to protect their homes and families from the negative consequences they could bring.

While Houston's African American and ethnic Mexican communities certainly bore the brunt of the construction of the city's built environment, citizens throughout the Houston metropolitan area felt the impact of highways and mass transit systems, albeit it unequally and on different terms. Robert Bullard, Tom Lewis, and Raymond Mohl discuss the influence of highways on black and ethnic Mexican communities and working-class central city populations, but by focusing almost exclusively on these groups, scholars have only told part of the story.<sup>22</sup> Roads ran through the suburbs as well, and despite the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s Americans were increasingly defining cities and suburbs as black and white spaces, in reality, as scholars such as Andrew Wiese and Becky Nicolaides have shown, each location consisted of a mixture of citizens.<sup>23</sup> Houston's suburbs were both white- and blue-collar. African Americans and ethnic Mexicans made homes in suburban Montgomery County and elite whites lived close to the nearly all-black Third Ward. These complex settlement patterns and the widespread presence of highways meant that projects altered the homes and communities of a broad population of Houstonians. That these roads affected the lives of nearly all Houstonians, even if those changes remained uneven, shows why so many Houstonians attempted to shape decisions about their routes and use.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equality* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004); Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); Raymond Mohl, "Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities," *Journal of Urban History*, July 2004, 30 (5): 674-705.

<sup>23</sup> Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in Working-Class Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.); Andrew Wiese, *Places of their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.)

## THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY AS METHOD

This study focuses in equal measure on the highways and mass transit networks that crisscrossed Houston, on the benefits and consequences that came with their construction, and on the forces and actors that imbued these networks with meaning. These elements comprise the foundation of Houstonians understanding of the politics of mobility. As geographer Jason Henderson has pointed out, these politics are never just concerned with transportation decisions; rather, they play a broader role in determining the physical and cognitive organization of the landscape.<sup>24</sup>

Highways, train tracks, and other pieces of the city's built environment shaped the lives of Houstonians who used or encountered them on a daily basis. More than simply determining where and how a Houstonian could travel, these systems imposed a tangible order onto the cityscape that stretched far beyond the corridors through which they ran.<sup>25</sup> Unlike other oft-studied urban history topics such as education, electoral politics, or employment, transportation and mobility could not be avoided. An urbanite could opt not to vote or not attend school, but one had to move to get to the grocery store, doctor's appointments, or work. Scholars have shown how the use and evolution of transportation structures, and an individual's experiences upon them, transformed the urban and suburban built environment, changed urban planning practices, and altered societal notions of technology, speed, and time.<sup>26</sup> This study highlights the role these structures played in shaping individual's conceptions of place. Concerns about how the presence or

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<sup>24</sup> Jason Henderson, "The Spaces of Parking: Mapping the Politics of Mobility in San Francisco," *Antipode* Vol. 41 (1) 2009: 70-91.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Merriman, "Enfolding and Gathering the Landscape: A Geography of England's M1 Corridor," in Hvattum, et. al., eds., *Routes, Roads, and Landscapes*, 213-228.

<sup>26</sup> Mimi Sheller, "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21 (4/5), 2004: 221-242; Wells, *Car Country*; Finstein, "Lofty Visions"; David Nye, "Redefining the American Sublime, from Open Road to Interstate," in Hvattum, et. al., eds., *Routes, Roads, and Landscapes*.

absence of a highway, bus route, or train track might impact their homes or the character of their neighborhoods motivated Houstonians to engage with debates about mobility.

Transportation structures and their uses are simultaneously ephemeral and permanent parts of urban life. A pedestrian's route may change on a daily basis or a commuter may take the same drive each morning for decades. Mobility practices can shift with the turn of the wheel or the acceleration of a gait. Yet, all these uses are carried out on a system of semi-permanent pieces of the cityscape. Overpasses and sidewalks are built to last. Steel, concrete, and asphalt persist for years. As much as these elements are defined by their uses, their placement, form, and intended purpose reflect power. Those who dominated decision-making in given moments also determined how and where highways and transit systems would be built. In many ways the transient, yet solid nature of transportation structures imitates the city writ large. The meanings of spaces can change in a moment. So too can seemingly permanent structures be demolished. Buildings, roads, and cities continue to be made and remade, if only to be imagined and forgotten anew by those who look upon them.

Houstonians, like all Americans in the postwar period, ascribed both vernacular and formal definitions to highways and mass transit systems they encountered. A road that to some marked a boundary—or barrier—between two communities for others served as a link between two end points. Elected officials and planning professionals designed routes and passed laws that established rules for the use of roadways and public buses, yet users could violate those regulations by speeding, resisting segregated riding rules, or contesting the construction of the systems themselves.<sup>27</sup> For much of the 1900s, access to mobility, particularly automobility, meant access to freedom from protective

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<sup>27</sup> On law and mobility, Timothy Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 238-280.

parents, stifling hometowns, meddling employers, or crowded cities.<sup>28</sup> This driving-as-autonomy message made highways a sign of American ingenuity and individualism. It was appropriated and put to use by young Americans, car companies, and even the government.<sup>29</sup> Highways became problematic in the 1970s as an increasing number of Americans worried about the environmental problems they created and their detrimental influence on urban form, issues that contributed to the reemergence of mass transit. Such shifts illustrate how seemingly unchanging parts of the urban landscape can reveal a great deal about the larger space they inhabit and the society that built and used them.

Despite the open road's hold on the postwar American psyche, securing access to that dream and to even more basic forms of mobility during the twentieth century was far from a given; rather, it was linked to power relations and often dependent upon one's race, age, class, and gender.<sup>30</sup> Car ownership rates among African Americans, for example, while on the rise in the 1950s, remained about half that of white Americans, making this group more dependent upon public transportation.<sup>31</sup> In Houston, African Americans fought against segregation on city transit systems throughout the first half of the twentieth century and into the postwar period. As the size of the metropolitan area

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<sup>28</sup> Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008),

<sup>29</sup> Cotten Seiler, "Statist Means to Individualist Ends: Subjectivity, Automobility, and the Cold-War State." *American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 5-36.

<sup>30</sup> Cresswell, *On the Move*, 238-280; on women and mobility, 312-348; Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 69-128; Sarah Frohardt-Lane, "Close Encounters: Interracial Contact and Conflict on Detroit's Public Transit in World War II," *The Journal of Transport History* 33 (2) (December 1, 2012): 212-227; Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). Throughout this dissertation I use race as a category of analysis because it was a distinction used by Houstonians. My use of the category, though, does not dismiss recent scholarship on the socially constructed nature of the terms and ideologies of race, which have been used to mask broader categorization by economic class. See Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America*, (New York: Basic Book, 2013.)

<sup>31</sup> Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 112-116; Clair Brown, *American Standards of Living: 1918-1988* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 223-230.



grew in the 1950s, carless Houstonians recognized that access to adequate transportation was a necessity and the topic began to take on added importance in city debates. Bus riders of all races complained to the private companies throughout the decade as service faltered. Some African American residents in the Acres Home community felt so underserved by the white-owned bus companies that they ran their own bus between downtown and the subdivision for a decade between 1958 and 1968.<sup>32</sup> As discussed in Chapter Four, African Americans and ethnic Mexicans rejected the city's first attempt to make a public transit authority because they doubted that it would serve their needs. These actions, similar to those occurring across the nation in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrated that Houstonians with circumscribed access to mobility not only recognized this denial, but acted to correct it.

This study's simultaneous focus on massive elements of the built environment and the cultural and political responses to those components by a variety of Houstonians, required the innovative use of a wide collection of visual, oral history, and written sources. Maps, historic photographs, aerial imagery, and Houston city directories helped to paint a picture of how Houston's transportation structures altered the landscape of the city over the course of this study. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps captured images of neighborhoods before and after roads came through, giving a graphic sense of transition. On top of these visual sources, written government documents—city council minutes, county election results, and environmental impact statements—all provided valuable insight into how the official perspective toward transportation was formed. Documents created by the Houstonians who resisted or championed specific modes of movement also proved fruitful. Hand-drawn signs warning about the dangers of a road's

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Papademetriou, "Houston Mass Transit Chronology," H-MTA Vertical File, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC).

construction and community newspaper stories about the need for rail illustrate how residents viewed the debates in which they participated.

Beyond archival research, oral histories comprise an important element of this dissertation because they illuminate the impact that highways and mass transit projects had on people's lives in ways that the textual archive cannot. Interviews allowed Houstonians to discuss the shifting character of their communities before and after the building of transportation structures. To augment the significant oral history collections in local archives, I conducted eleven interviews. These were split evenly between: 1) Houstonians who experienced the rise of transportation structures from the perspective of private citizens; and 2) Houstonians who participated in their construction as both private citizens and public officials. In order to find subjects for these interviews, I canvassed community organizations in areas on which my dissertation focused (e.g. the Fifth Ward near Interstate 10), sought interviewees who represented particular groups whose perspectives I hoped to include (e.g. African Americans), or who participated in specific groups related to my project (e.g. The Metropolitan Organization). To find interviewees whose professional life overlapped with aspects of my project I interviewed several former METRO officials, a former highway commissioner, and a land use lawyer.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

"Power Moves" use two sections of three chapters each to cover the transportation debates that occurred in the city between 1950 and 1985. The section division is drawn between chapters that deal solely with decisions about roadways between 1950 and 1970 and those that consider a series of mass transit referenda that occurred between 1973 and 1983. The first section, "Roads to Live By," considers Houston's embrace of highway construction, the effects of that building program, and the

first instance of successful citizen pushback against a roadway. This section demonstrates how the political process that shaped the city's transportation network slowly democratized between 1950 and 1970 as citizens became more engaged. The second section, "Transit Debates," looks at referenda held in 1973, 1978, and 1983 that considered the idea of building a mass transit system in Houston. The debates around these votes demonstrated how politics and decision-making about transportation in the city had changed since 1950. The choices those citizens of the HMA who voted in the three referenda made structured the area's transportation system—and the city itself—for decades to come.

Chapter One provides the historical context of Houston's postwar rise to national prominence and highlights the central position that transportation structures played in enabling its ascent. In particular, it explains how the city made highways its primary purveyor of mobility by the early 1950s. It draws a picture of Houston's political climate and establishes the state of Houstonians' engagement with the politics of mobility in the immediate postwar period. Highlighting the positions of corporate leaders, suburban real estate developers, and elected officials, this chapter demonstrates the top-down nature of decision-making in 1950s Houston. It also examines the political priorities championed by this leadership group. From resistance to zoning to an embrace of annexation, the common thread between these practices was the encouragement of economic growth and the maintenance of tight control over city politics in order to maintain elite influence. It concludes by describing the HMA's postwar highway development and the changes it brought to Houston's physical shape.

Chapter Two picks up on the opening chapter's discussion of the construction and planning of the city's transportation system by focusing on three major road projects built during the 1950s and early 1960s. The process of developing these highways displayed

how elite Houstonians and officials drove the planning process, and, for the most part, ignored the concerns of everyday Houstonians. By looking closely at projects that cut through central city neighborhoods populated by African Americans and at the planning of a road through an all-white suburb, this chapter will demonstrate citizens' relative lack of power in transportation planning during the postwar period and the broad effects highways had on residents' lives. While roads shaped all parts of the city, the projects that ran through African American and ethnic Mexican areas undeniably took a larger physical toll, displacing far more residents and claiming many more homes through eminent domain. Citizens throughout the HMA could do little to change this initial round of construction, but as this chapter concludes, the actions residents took to resist these seemingly inevitable projects shifted the way Houstonians engaged in debates about mobility and the networks that allowed it.

Chapter Three documents a shift in whose vision of the politics of mobility influenced the city's transportation choices. Along with Chapter Four, this chapter acts as the hinge for the dissertation. It captures one of the earliest examples of successful citizen pushback against top-down decision-making in Houston. Focused on a proposal to construct a highway through the predominantly ethnic Mexican East End, this chapter examines how citizens conceptualized and organized against the roadway, what arguments they advanced, and why they succeeded in blocking the roadway. East Enders resisted highway plans by employing a rhetoric that called for democratic self-determinism, environmental justice, and civil rights. Combined with changes to federal laws about public works oversight and a nationwide funding crisis, the resistance of citizens helped derail the highway project.<sup>33</sup> This signaled one of the first times that

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<sup>33</sup> This chapter will offer both a counter example and corroboration of the arguments of Jeremy Korr, "Physical and Social Construction of the Capital Beltway," in Thomas Zeller and Christof Mauch ed. *The*

Houstonians successfully implemented their own visions for mobility and served as a rebuttal to the previously unimpeachable planning power of city elites and officials.

Chapter Four represents the first chapter of Section II, “Transit Debates.” At the same time that East Enders debated the construction of the highway, all Houstonians considered the merits of creating the city’s first publicly owned mass transit agency, the Houston Area Rapid Transit Authority (HARTA). Emerging at a time when cities across the United States were considering rail-based mass transit systems as a way to ease traffic congestion and address environmental problems, the HARTA vote represented the city’s first postwar opportunity to alter its approach to mobility. The city’s changing political atmosphere manifested itself in the debate as a unique coalition of African American, ethnic Mexican, and working-class white suburbanites opposed the plan and helped to reject the HARTA proposal. This unique political alliance demonstrated the peculiarities of the HMA’s metropolitan power structure and challenges historical narrative about the relationship between cities and suburbs in the 1970s.

Chapter Five considers the city’s second attempt to create a mass transit authority and shows that defining the politics of mobility remained a truly metropolitan debate. The lead up to the vote to create the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston and Harris

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*World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008). Korr argues that citizens had very little input into highway placement and construction through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that their opinions and reactions to certain highways helped to socially and culturally define the space of the roadway. The Harrisburg example shows how some citizens successfully influenced both the planning and the image of roadways. It also overlaps with the conclusions reached by Raymond Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities: The US Department of Transportation and the Highway Revolt, 1966-1973,” *Journal of Policy History*, 20:2 (2008): 193-226. In this article Mohl argues that the withdrawal of federal support for controversial road projects played a greater role in most of the successful blockings of highways during the Highway Revolt. This chapter agrees with Mohl’s assertion of the importance of federal involvement, but also highlights the importance of local, citizen-driven opposition in delaying projects enough to allow other factors to stop them for good. This corroborates the findings of Altshuler and Luberhoff in *Mega-Projects*, 251-254. They argue that in most controversial highway projects of the 1960s and 1970s the money could always be found, but the growth of activism combined with a growing distaste to pushback against it among politicians led to a decline in controversial projects.

County (METRO), saw a similar alliance of black, ethnic Mexican, and, this time, wealthier suburban whites who lived in areas that the transit authority would serve, once again influence the outcome of a metropolitan vote. These groups used their political power to gain concessions before helping to approve METRO. The Authority's inauguration not only signaled the continued importance of citizen input to transportation planning, but also offered black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians another opportunity to assert their own political desires into HMA-wide discussions.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, documents how the debate around two additional transportation referenda led to the dissolution of the fragile alliance of the city's citizens of color and white suburbanites. The referenda consisted of a second attempt to create a rail system and a vote to commission a Harris County toll road authority. A powerful civic group, The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), came out on the side of the rail plan. An interracial network of church groups from within the city's inner loop, the group believed rail held greater promise for central city residents than the toll road proposal. Supporters of the tollway plan, mostly white suburbanites from both affluent and working-class municipalities, decided that they no longer wanted to support Houston-based transit systems. They supported toll roads that could bring them into downtown with ease. The debate laid bare the tensions between city and suburban citizens that had remained dormant in Houston for longer than other cities and showed the staying power of auto-centric planning. In the end the toll road plan won out. For the next two decades transportation development in the HMA remained road-based and suburb-oriented. Despite Houston's history of balanced metropolitan politics, the 1983 outcomes made it clear that white suburbanites possessed the ability to implement their visions of the politics of mobility and this reality shaped the city's approach to transportation in the ensuing twenty years.

Through these chapters this dissertation will trace how a wide variety of Houstonians engaged in debates about mobility and the nature of transportation structures in order to shape the city in ways that served their interests. Over thirty-five years Houston transitioned from a city dominated, but not controlled, by a small cohort of white elites into a metropolitan area whose multiethnic electorate weighed in on the choices of both the city and wider HMA. The decisions Houstonians made about their transportation networks and the visions those choices projected, held increasingly important roles in shaping the physical city. Houstonians never agreed upon what mobility meant, but by striving to define and secure it for themselves, they formulated Houston's unique system and built the structures along which Houstonians still move today.

## **SECTION I: ROADS TO LIVE BY**



**Chapter One**  
**Building a Highway Metropolis:**  
**The Origins and Advent of Houston's Postwar Growth**

This is Houston. It is a city that refuses to stand still for anybody. It is a city where the old—except in its sturdiest forms—quickly disappears, in which the new quickly becomes the old, in which change is relentless and rushing. It is a city on the move, with few to observe its movement, for most of its citizens are moving with it, moving too swiftly to stand aside and watch...Pause, if you safely can, somewhere beside the Gulf Freeway. The movement will dazzle you. But do not stand still too long...you might get run over. Or—what is worse in Houston—you surely will get left behind.

W.D. Bedell, *Houston Post*, 1957

Despite its growing pains it was clear to almost every observer between 1945 and 1960 that Houston represented the future of urban America. The city and its inhabitants seemed to never stop moving. From home to work, from city center to suburb, along local streets and smooth new highways, Houstonians' movement, both their economic and physical mobility, provided the city with the essential elements of its postwar reputation. Its pulsating activity orbited around symbols of the city's growth: the headquarters of national petroleum companies that dominated downtown; the massive oil refineries and petrochemical companies along the ship channel; the nascent but bustling medical center; lot after lot and subdivision after subdivision of suburban tract housing; and the expanding road network that connected all these places. Behind this movement stood an economic boom that began during World War II and persisted in the decades after the war. This growth brought hundreds of thousands of migrants to the city—whites and African Americans from East Texas and Louisiana, ethnic Mexicans from the Rio Grande Valley and Northern Mexico, and increasingly, white Americans from beyond the South and the Southwest. These people brought their own life experiences, politics, and visions for the future with them and added them to Houston's already complicated mixture. Housing these newcomers required a massive residential build up that transformed the

ranches and fields around the city into homes and subdivisions, and made vast amounts of wealth for real estate speculators. Lucrative wartime industries—especially petrochemicals and petroleum refining—transitioned into postwar operation and drove the expansion of Houston’s economy.<sup>1</sup>

As national media profiles of the city hinted, though, Houston’s rapid transformation from city to metropolis did not come without problems. Writing for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1947, George Sessions Perry described the city as groping its way toward greatness: “it is an incipient heavyweight champion in its pimply-faced adolescence, virile, disordered, in selected spots beautiful, but primarily awesome and unstoppable.”<sup>2</sup> Houston’s population increase and outward physical expansion gave the city a reputation of strength, yet those very forces also precipitated some of Houston’s most pressing infrastructural and political challenges. Suburban residential development placed immense service demands on local governments. City departments worked diligently to build and expand sewage and water networks, local streets, and drainage systems, but the construction of these systems and other infrastructure lagged throughout the city. Suburban municipalities absorbed thousands of the area’s migrants and with their newfound numbers challenged Houston’s dominance of metropolitan politics. The combination of the city’s longtime resistance to zoning and the Houston Metropolitan Area’s (HMA) rapid growth resulted in a volatile mixture of land uses and complicated local planning efforts. An accumulation of automobiles led to congested highways and demands for new transportation structures. Changing demographics forced city

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region* (Greenwich, Conn.: Jai Press, Inc, 1980), 99-107. Real estate boomed in the 1950s and 1960s with both residential and commercial construction on the rise in the suburbs and downtown, Joseph A. Pratt and Walter Buenger, *But Also Good Business: Texas Commerce Banks and the Financing of Houston and Texas, 1886-1986* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1986), 222-226.

<sup>2</sup> George Sessions Perry, “Houston,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 29, 1947, Box 35, Folder 12, GFC, SCLUH.

politicians and their elite allies to scramble to maintain the status quo and to protect their power. When Houstonians attempted to address these issues, they disagreed over what their city needed and how it should grow.

Houstonians did not experience the benefits of the city's growth or the pains of its problems in equal measure. White-collar and blue-collar white residents found gainful employment in a number of industries and benefitted from access to cheap homes throughout the HMA. African American and ethnic Mexican residents, on the other hand, faced differing forms of discrimination that prevented them from accessing the spoils of Houston's postwar growth—higher-paying jobs and better housing—at the same rates as white Houstonians. The majority of blacks and ethnic Mexicans continued to work in low-level oil industry jobs, as laborers at places such as the Port of Houston, or as service workers. Blacks remained disenfranchised until the 1960s. Race-based segregation limited their access to public resources and kept them confined to particular areas of the city. Houstonians of Mexican origin, while enfranchised and defined as white throughout most of the twentieth century, nonetheless faced discrimination based upon their nationality and confronted similar economic and social boundaries as blacks that prevented them from securing public resources.

Compounding the effects of such discrimination, black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians confronted the negative consequences of Houston's growth on a daily basis. The poor physical condition of neighborhoods populated by these Houstonians demonstrated that Houston officials neglected communities of color in order to focus resources on white, wealthier parts of the city. The Houston government invested little public money toward improving these areas prior to the 1960s. Streets were often unpaved or lacked proper drainage; healthcare, education, and recreation facilities were woefully inadequate. However, continued in-migration of black and ethnic Mexican

immigrants changed the political dynamics of the city beginning in the late 1950s. Backed by the electoral power of a growing constituency and empowered by state and national level civil rights victories, these Houstonians clamored evermore insistently for a seat at the city's table.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter argues that the construction of the HMA's highway network and the contemporaneous, interconnected expansion of suburban development between 1945 and 1960 both triggered and reflected changes taking place within the HMA because of its demographic and territorial growth. The geographic spread of residents, and the subsequent shift in mobility priorities, resulted in a diffusion of political power throughout the HMA, weakening Houston officials once nearly complete control of metropolitan decision-making and necessitating a greater degree of metropolitan-wide planning than ever before. To both the elected officials contending with growth and the residents creating it, highways seemed to provide a solution to many of the problems the HMA faced. The construction of highways not only transformed the way Houstonians moved, but also rearticulated how residents interacted with one another and understood their city by reshaping its built environment. Citizens projected a variety of meanings onto the planning and construction of the city's highways, articulating their own understandings of the politics of mobility. With near unanimity they recognized transportation structures as vital to the future of the city. Yet, what Houstonians could not agree upon, and what became increasingly contested over the course of the remainder of

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<sup>3</sup> Tyina Leaneice Steptoe, "Dixie West: Race, Migration, and the Color Lines in Jim Crow Houston" (Ph.D., The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2008); Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Cary Wintz and Howard Beeth, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992); Arnolde De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Guadalupe San Miguel, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1979).

the twentieth century, was who would hold the power to determine the shape these structures took and whose interests they would serve.

The diverse set of Houstonians who participated in postwar growth and transportation discussions offered competing expectations for mobility. Elected officials and wealthy elites, an overwhelmingly white and male group, viewed mobility as central to ensuring that the HMA continued to grow economically and physically. For this reason they worked diligently to remove constraints caused by traffic congestion or limited infrastructure. For suburbanites, again predominantly white and middle- to upper-class, but also consisting of working-class whites in municipalities along the ship channel, mobility meant easy access to sites of employment, recreation, and consumption. They expected politicians and planners to provide them with roads that could take them from their driveway to points throughout the HMA in their private automobiles and at low cost. For city residents, people from a number of racial groups and economic classes, mobility was more complicated. After the war, Houstonians in the central city could access the city's limited private bus companies, but by that point all who could afford them, mostly white Houstonians and a smaller percentage of wealthier blacks and ethnic Mexican Houstonians, owned private cars. Like their suburban counterparts, car-owning Houstonians pressured officials to provide the infrastructure they required. HMA car owners supported investment in roads and did not raise a fuss as the city's private mass transit system deteriorated. Other city residents, mainly from lower economic stations and predominantly black or ethnic Mexican, relied on walking or buses for their daily movements. Even if they experienced segregation on the buses, as blacks did until the 1960s, or if the systems failed to adequately meet the service demand in their neighborhoods, as was the case with both populations, the systems were essential to the daily movements of black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians. The decline of the city's bus

system and the splintering of neighborhoods by roadways, then, meant a great deal of disruption to riders and pedestrians alike. Unfortunately for members of these groups, in the immediate postwar period they possessed very little political power, or at least not enough to cancel out the demands of their more influential counterparts.

Between 1945 and 1960 elected officials, their professional staffs, and a small, but influential coterie of elites—leaders from the Houston Chamber of Commerce, executives of major corporations, land and real estate developers, and oilmen—dominated, but never completely controlled, local decision-making.<sup>4</sup> Martin Melosi argues that one of the main distinctions between pre- and postwar Houston was that the postwar infrastructure decisions of city officials rippled outward to affect the development of the HMA in ways they had not prior to the war.<sup>5</sup> Highways captured the metropolitan influence these leaders possessed exceedingly well. Houston leaders hoped that road construction would stimulate the HMA economy by driving suburban development and increasing land values. Moreover, they intended for the building of the highway system to secure their control over the entire HMA by linking outlying citizens and communities evermore closely to the central city.<sup>6</sup> The immense influence of

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Feagin, *Free-Enterprise City: Houston in Socio-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 106-148; David McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas, 1969), 200-240; Chandler Davidson, "Houston: The City Where the Business of Government is Business," in Wendell Bedichek and Neal Tannahill eds., *Public Policy in Texas* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), 275-88; Craig Smyser, "Houston Power," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 30, July 1, 1977; Albert Schaffer, "The Houston Growth Coalition In 'Boom' and 'Bust,'" *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 11 no. 1 (March 1989): 21-38; Igor Vojnovic, "Governance In Houston: Growth Theories and Urban Pressures," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 25, no. 5, (December 2003): 589-624; Robert Fisher, "Urban Policy in Houston," *Urban Studies*, 26 (1989): 144-154; Richard Murray and Robert Thomas, *Progrowth Politics: Change and Governance in Houston* (Berkeley: Institute of Government Studies Press, University of California, 1991), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Melosi, "Houston's Public Sinks: Sanitary Services from Local Concerns to Regional Challenges," in Martin Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt eds., *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 109-147.

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited: Path-Dependent Annexation and Highway Practices in an American Metropolis," *Transfers: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Mobility History*, 4 (1) (March 2014): 97-115.

Houston leaders during the postwar period made their choices about roadways, and mobility in general, the de facto choices of the entire metropolitan area.

While officials may have touted highways as beneficial for all Houstonians, few non-professional, non-elite residents played a role in their planning during the 1950s and 1960s. This dearth of citizen oversight mirrored national patterns in highway decision-making and reflected the realities of Houston politics.<sup>7</sup> Not only did officials, usually planners and engineers, decide what systems would be built and where they would run, they also determined which parts of Houston and which Houstonians would receive the benefits or suffer the consequences of their construction. However, non-elite Houstonians were not entirely absent from the process of creating the HMA's transportation network or its meaning during this period. Citizens influenced the city's embrace of highways by buying cars, demanding auto-centric infrastructure, and moving to the suburbs. Further, as the consequences of road development—displacement, traffic noise, and altered neighborhoods—became clear after their construction in the early 1960s, affected citizens complained and expressed hesitancy about further implementation. As later chapter will show, this hesitancy would grow into outright resistance by the late 1960s and 1970s.

#### **ANTECEDENTS TO HOUSTON'S POSTWAR GROWTH**

As the quote that opened this chapter makes clear, Houston's postwar expansion and seemingly ever-changing urban landscape fascinated the American public during the 1950s. Postwar portraits of Houston, however, too often depicted the city as an overnight

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<sup>7</sup> All highway construction decisions during the 1950s and 1960s were made by a combination of local, state, and federal policy makers. See Bruce Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1988); Joseph DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013); Mark Rose and Raymond Mohl, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-2000* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012); Mark Rose, Paul S. Barrett, and Bruce Seely, *The Best Transportation System in the World: Railroads, Trucks, Airlines, and American Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

sensation and ignored the decisions and policies that jumpstarted its ascent from regional capital to international metropolis during the preceding half century. Stepping away from the glossy magazine versions of Houston allows one to see the roots of the city's economic and physical development. Many of the same processes and actors that shaped Houston's growth between 1900 and 1945 remained influential as the city entered the postwar period. Understanding their places is essential to understanding the decisions Houstonians made about mobility in the 1950s.

Between 1900 and 1960, Houston's economic elite—a group of white, male bankers, real estate developers, lumber and cotton magnates, and oilmen—dominated decision-making in Houston. This group generally remained outside elected office, but close political allies like mayor Oscar Holcombe, who served off and on as mayor for thirty-three years between 1921 and 1956, often acted on their behalf.<sup>8</sup> Jesse Jones, one of the city's leading businessmen and its most influential citizen from the 1920s to the 1950s, never sought elected office but nonetheless parlayed his business success and influence into an important role in the national Democratic Party. His financial acumen was so respected that Republican President Herbert Hoover appointed him to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932. President Franklin Roosevelt made him chairman of the organization in 1933 and United States Secretary of Commerce in 1940. These positions put a Houstonian in charge of millions of dollars in federal funds during the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup> In addition to Jones other leaders such as M.D. Anderson and Will Clayton, owners of one of the world's largest cotton-trading companies; brothers George and Herman Brown, owners of the construction company Brown and Root; and Gus

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Holcombe's approach to politics, which mixed elite friendship with populist appeal, see Amy Bridges, "Boss Tweed and V.O. Key in Texas," in Miller and Sanders, eds., *Urban Texas*, 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> McComb, *Houston*, 168-170. For more on Jesse Jones and other elites see Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 106-148; Steven Fenberg, *Unprecedented Power: Jesse Jones, Capitalism, and the Common Good* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2011).



Wortham, owner of American General insurance, each supported important local, state, and federal politicians, including Lyndon B. Johnson and Albert Thomas during the 1930s and 1940s. They maintained close relationships with these politicians as they moved into positions from which they would help develop Houston after World War II.<sup>10</sup> As the city grew in the postwar period, suburban developers joined this group of elites.

The close relationship elites maintained with government officials from the local, state, and national level permitted them to implement their visions for the future of the city during the postwar period. They justified their influence by maintaining that their actions were selfless, aimed not at enriching themselves, but instead intended to improve the city as a whole.<sup>11</sup> While these elites financially benefitted from many of the reforms and policies they supported, initiatives to modernize the city's banking system and update its infrastructure systems also stoked Houston's general advancement and growth.<sup>12</sup> Such results allowed elites to paint themselves as Houston-first boosters and to gain even more decision-making power.<sup>13</sup> From their position of influence elites could also criticize practices or policies such as zoning, higher taxation, or the enshrinement of civil and labor rights that they believed threatened either their own economic and political interests

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Pratt and Christopher J. Castaneda, *Builders: Herman and George R. Brown*, (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1999), 157-191.

<sup>11</sup> Miller and Sanders, eds., *Urban Texas*, xi; Char Miller and David R. Johnson, "The Rise of Urban Texas," in Miller and Sanders, eds., *Urban Texas*, 3-29. Joseph A. Pratt and Kenneth Lipartito, *Baker and Botts in the Development of Modern Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 47-63; Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*; McComb, *Houston*; Barry J. Kaplan, "Houston: The Golden Buckle of the Sunbelt," in Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 196-212.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Pratt, "8F and Many More: Business and Civic Leadership in Modern Houston," *Houston Review of History and Culture*, 2 (1) 2004: 2-7, 31-44. Pratt argues that while there is no disputing that these leaders amassed massive power and often supported goals that benefitted their interests, they also helped shepherd through several essential reforms, policies, and practices that benefitted Houston as a whole by facilitating growth and development. Pratt and Lipartito, *Baker and Botts*.

<sup>13</sup> Robert B. Fairbanks, *For the City as a Whole: Planning, Politics, and the Public Interest in Dallas, Texas, 1900-1965* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); Sarah Elkind, *How Local Politics Shape Federal Policy: Business, Power, and the Environment in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

or the economic growth of the city. By resisting such policies and spurning progressive social practices elites helped foster an undemocratic atmosphere in Houston where the votes and concerns of working-class and poor Houstonians of all races were routinely ignored by elected officials and their elite supporters.<sup>14</sup>

Neither the city's rapid growth nor the wealth of many of its elites would have been possible without Houston's access to an abundance of natural resources and the links created between the city and global economies from the early 1900s onward.<sup>15</sup> Prior to 1900, agricultural products such as lumber and cotton buoyed Houston's economy and were packaged in the city before being sent to either Galveston or New Orleans for sale. Then, in the early 1900s, three key developments placed the city at the center of the Texas oil boom and changed its economy drastically.<sup>16</sup> The destruction of Galveston by a hurricane in 1900, the discovery of oil outside of Houston at Spindletop in 1901, and the construction of a deep-sea port and ship channel in the 1910s propelled Houston's transformation into an "energy-intensive metropolis," in which the oil industry inextricably shaped the economy and the physical environment.<sup>17</sup> By the 1930s, oil was the largest producer of wealth in the region. The nation's petrochemical industry came to Houston during World War II. Seemingly overnight dozens of refineries and factories

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reforms in the Southwest* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the South: The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1910* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1983), 202-208. Platt argues that the shift to commission government in 1905 allowed the city's elites to weaken the political strength of both labor unions and African American voters. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 118-119.

<sup>15</sup> Feagin, *The Free Enterprise City*, 4, 20, 43, 70; Platt, *City Building in the South*, 43; Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region*, 8-9; Pratt and Lipartito, *Baker and Botts*.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Houston's pre-oil economy see Platt, *City Building in the South*; Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*; Pratt, *Growth of a Refining Region*.

<sup>17</sup> Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 3. For more information on the Hurricane see David McComb, *Galveston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 121-149.

populated the shorelines of the ship channel all the way to Galveston Bay.<sup>18</sup> The concentration of the oil industry and its derivatives drew secondary, supply-chain businesses to the city, increasing oil's economic footprint.<sup>19</sup>

The construction and improvement of transportation networks aided the development of Houston's resource-based economy and influenced the built environment of the city. Prior to 1900 Houston was mainly a railway hub and collection point for inland resources.<sup>20</sup> Rail continued to be a major freight system for the city well into the twentieth century. After a hurricane destroyed Galveston in 1900, though, Houston had an opportunity to take water-borne commerce away from its regional rival. Local business leaders and Houston elected officials at the city and national level leapt at the chance. Using a mix of funds from Houston and the federal government they created a deep-sea port and the Houston Ship Channel in the 1910s.<sup>21</sup>

While the ship channel and freight railways influenced the industrial and economic development of the city, commuter transportation shaped the city's residential and commercial patterns. Houston's first mass transit firm, the Houston City Railway Company, began to operate a horse-drawn streetcar in 1868. By 1891, electrified streetcars were the norm and by 1927 track mileage had reached a peak of ninety miles.

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<sup>18</sup> For list of active factories and refineries along the ship channel in 1955 see Houston Port Commission, "Port of Houston Industrial District" Map, Box 36, Folder 9, George Fuermann Collection (GFC), Special Collections Library, University of Houston (SCLUH).

<sup>19</sup> For the growth of the Petrochemical industry and other secondary economic sectors, see Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region*, 10, 99-107; McComb, *Houston*, 184-186. Platt, *City Building in the South*, 177. For discussion of World War II's impact on the city see, Paul Alejandro Levengood, "For the Duration and Beyond: World War II and the Creation of Modern Houston," (PhD Diss., Rice University, 1999.)

<sup>20</sup> For early economic history and rail history see Platt, *City Building in the South*, 30-33; Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 49-50, 112-114.

<sup>21</sup> For a general overview of the port's history see, Marilyn Sibley, *The Port of Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); McComb, *Houston*, 93-97; Lynn M. Alperin, *Custodians of the Coast: History of the United States Army Engineers at Galveston* (Galveston, Tex.: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1977). For the role the city's banks played in financing the port see Pratt and Buenger, *But Also Good Business*, 23-24.

These lines spurred the development of residential neighborhoods farther from downtown, with streetcar suburbs popping up in River Oaks, Houston Heights, and Magnolia Park. By the mid-1920s, private automobiles began to eat into ridership and private bus companies with more flexible routes competed with the streetcars for patrons. By 1940, all of Houston's streetcars were gone, driven out by the combination of low ridership and financial problems.<sup>22</sup> By World War II, auto transit—both car and bus—dominated the city, but Houston lacked a formal highway plan until the 1940s. State and city officials recognized that roads, like rail before them, offered an opportunity to connect the city to the hinterlands and hoped that highways would afford the HMA access to the nation's flowering trucking industry.<sup>23</sup> Leaders began to seriously formulate plans for a metropolitan road system during the war. The construction of the first highways and the growing number of private automobiles, combined with the poor management of the private bus companies, caused a free fall in bus ridership during the 1950s. By the end of the decade, bus companies, like streetcars before them, struggled to maintain service levels.

Regulations, and their absence, also influenced the city's built environment during the twentieth century. Houston's lack of a zoning ordinance, for example, led to several physical outcomes for the city. Residents considered enacting zoning regulations four

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<sup>22</sup> For more information about Houston's earliest commuter transit see Peter Papademetriou, *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston 1830-1980* (Houston, TX: Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, 1982); Erik O. Slotboom, *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey* (Cincinnati, Ohio: C.J. Krehbiel, 2003), 4-5; Steven Baron, *Houston Electric: The Street Railways Of Houston, Texas* (Lexington, Ky.: S.M. Baron, 1996). For a discussion of the impact streetcars had on urban areas see Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 87-125; Sam Bass Warner Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>23</sup> Char Miller and David R. Johnson, "The Rise of Urban Texas," in Char Miller and Heywood T. Sanders, eds., *Urban Texas: Politics and Development* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 11. Rise of Trucking see Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*; William Childs, *Trucking and the Public Interest: The Emergence of Federal Regulation, 1914-1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

times between 1927 and 1965, but each time voters rejected proposals.<sup>24</sup> Many elite businessmen, particularly real estate developers, argued against zoning because they believed it compromised the city's adherence to free-market principles. Driving that argument was the fact that the absence of rigid zoning rules allowed developers to determine the direction of the city's growth by placing commercial and residential projects in any area they wished.<sup>25</sup> The fact that development was unencumbered by zoning also encouraged a state of constant transition in Houston's built environment, with structures going up or coming down on a nearly daily basis. The construction of highways through Houston neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s, and the displacement they caused, then, were not anomalies, but rather another iteration of the city's changing landscape. Houstonians were not of one mind about such patterns, as demonstrated by resistance to highways, historic preservation drives, and campaigns for zoning. The city's lax land-use regulations also complicated attempts to plan future infrastructure systems.<sup>26</sup>

The absence of zoning and other such regulations did not affect the lives of Houstonians in the same way. Several residential neighborhoods, particularly those populated by wealthier white Houstonians, relied on segregation, distance, high property values, and deed restrictions or restrictive covenants to protect the character of their

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<sup>24</sup> Neighborhood Improvement Council, "Zoning in History" Pamphlet, Box 39, Folder 9, GFC, SCLUH, 1959. Both the George Fuermann Collection, Box 39, SCLUH and the V.P. Ringer Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), contain the records of the Neighborhood Improvement Council, a pro-zoning organization from the 1959 zoning push. See Barry J. Kaplan, "Urban Development, Economic Growth, and Personal Liberty: The Rhetoric of the Houston Anti-Zoning Movements, 1947-1963," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 84 (October 1980): 133-168; Ben Koush, "Houston Lives the Life: Modern Houses in the Suburbs, 1952-1962," (Master's Thesis: Rice University, 2002), 17.

<sup>25</sup> For more on Houston's zoning policies and the desire of developers to maintain no zoning, see John Mixon, interview by author, November 11, 2011, Houston, Texas, audio recording. Mixon is a real estate and property law professor at the University of Houston. He was active in the 1989 zoning campaign and possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of earlier efforts; Bernard Siegan, *Land Use Without Zoning* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1972); Kaplan, "Urban Development," 133-168.

<sup>26</sup> Neighborhood Improvement Council, "Zoning Education Committee: Utilities Report," 1960, Box 39, Folder 9, GFC, SCLUH; "Houston: Where Growth Comes Naturally," *Engineering News-Record* July 20, 1961, Box 39, Folder 9, GFC, SCLUH; Kaplan, "Urban Development."

neighborhoods during the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> For the first half of the century, de jure segregation kept African Americans hemmed into historically black neighborhoods in the city center. De facto segregation and economic limitations likewise kept Houstonians of Mexican origin concentrated in particular parts of the city. After the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, outlawed explicitly racial restrictions in 1948, previously white communities near black and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods began to integrate. Without legal justification for keeping these groups out, white residents attempted to organize neighbors to prevent home sales to blacks or ethnic Mexicans and resorted to violence to keep black families from moving into their neighborhoods. In 1953, for example, the home of the first black family to move into the previously all white Riverside subdivision was bombed.<sup>28</sup> As it became clear that even such drastic measure would not keep blacks and ethnic Mexican Houstonians out of formerly white neighborhoods, whites moved to subdivisions away from traditionally black and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods, hoping that distance and high home prices would keep their neighborhoods exclusive. By rewriting restrictions to prevent residents from renting rooms, creating businesses, or using properties for any practices deemed detrimental to the property values and peace of mind of their neighbors, communities hoped to keep home values high enough to make it difficult for lower-income residents to purchase a home. This approach was particularly effective in the city's most economically exclusive neighborhoods such as River Oaks. Residents here put a great deal of resources toward maintaining deed restrictions. Less prosperous neighborhoods could not defend deed restrictions to the same extent and this

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1994), 87-97; Robert Fisher, "Protecting Community and Property Values: Civic Clubs in Houston, 1909-70," in Miller and Sanders eds., *Urban Texas*, 128-137; Kaplan, "Urban Development." Beth Anne Shelton, Nestor Rodriguez, Joe Feagin, Robert Bullard, Robert Thomas, *Houston: Growth and Decline in a Sunbelt Boomtown* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1989), 55-60.

<sup>28</sup> On racial violence directed toward integrating blacks in Houston, see the film "This Is Our Home It Is Not for Sale," directed by Jon Schwartz, 1987, which tells the story of the integration of Riverside Terrace.

contributed to white flight and slow integration in areas nearest African American and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods.<sup>29</sup>

Since Houston's founding in 1836, the city has been framed, by Houstonians and non-Houstonians alike, as a model of free-market capitalism.<sup>30</sup> This reputation persisted into the decades between 1950 and 1985 and Houston's postwar elected officials and elites continued to promote the city as a bastion of laissez-faire capitalism. They argued that the hard work and business acumen of residents, combined with a commitment to limited government and low taxation, could foster economic success. Despite building a reputation for both themselves and the city as a champion of the free market, though, after World War II much of Houston's infrastructure growth depended upon the financial support of the federal and Texas governments. Houston officials and elites coveted investment in roads, oil pipelines, and the port, because they believed this would encourage economic growth. At the same time, officials and elites resisted public subsidies for social programs such as public housing because they worried that the federal oversight attached to such programs could threaten their political hold on the city. They also thought that investing in lower-income areas might lead to further questioning of the political status quo. To justify these concerns they argued that these practices would result in higher taxes and make Houston beholden to federal dollars.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For information about River Oaks' deed restrictions see Box 4W201, Ima Hogg Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (DBCAH); Houston Subdivision Collection, Box 4, MSS 118, HMRC; River Oaks Collection, MSS 12, HMRC; Koush, "Houston Lives the Life," 19-26.

<sup>30</sup> Feagin, *Free-Enterprise City*.

<sup>31</sup> Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*. For Houston's approach to federal urban renewal money see Susan MacManus, *Federal Aid to Houston* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983); Shelton, et al, *Houston*, 41-47. For discussion of oil regulation see Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 9; Joseph A. Pratt, "A Mixed Blessing: Energy, Economic Growth, and Houston's Environment," in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 21-51; Hugh S. Gorman, "The Houston Ship Channel and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Pollution," in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 52-68.

Despite their public dislike of federal money, this funding was essential to the rise of some of Houston's most important postwar elites. The Brown brothers would not have been the major players they were after World War II without wartime contracts their company, Brown and Root, received to build oil pipelines and construct ships for the Navy. Similar contracts continued after the war, when they rebuilt war-damaged areas and constructed North Atlantic Treaty Organization airbases throughout Europe. The corporation used this momentum to become one of the largest construction companies in the nation. By the 1960s, Brown and Root was one of only two construction firms in the U.S. to have revenues of more than \$1 billion.<sup>32</sup> The Browns were not alone in receiving federal support during World War II. Like other southern and southwestern cities, Houston as a whole received significant federal investment. Between contracts let to businesses like Brown and Root, the building of two oil pipelines, and support for the petrochemical industry, the federal government sent nearly \$265 million to Houston during the war.<sup>33</sup> This was a huge investment for a city supposedly allergic to federal money and one that helped to vault Houston into the postwar period with a strong economy. Infrastructure continued to be a major source of federal and state investment into Houston during the 1950s and 1960s as the interstate system was planned and constructed. Even as city officials accepted millions of dollars to support Houston's roads, they continued to resist funds for social programs until the mid-1960s when civil rights agitation and federal policy changes forced leaders to accept more funding.

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Williams, "Billion Dollar Builder," *Texas Parade* July 1969, Box 26, Folder 6, GFC, SCLUH, 23-30; Pratt and Castaneda, *Builders*; "Roadbuilders with a Flair for Other Jobs," *Business Week*, May 25, 1957, Box 26, Folder 6, GFC, SCLUH, 90-108.

<sup>33</sup> McComb, *Houston*, 189.



## POSTWAR GROWTH

The people of the HMA celebrated the arrival of the millionth Houstonian on July 3, 1954. The same day, developer Frank Sharp announced plans to open a huge suburban development, Sharpstown, in southwest Houston.<sup>34</sup> The timing of the two events demonstrated the link between Houston's decades of population growth and the explosion of suburban developments oriented around new highways. Articles celebrating Houston's population achievement framed the success as both a result of wise past decisions and as an indication of its promising future. The *Houston Post* drew a straight line from the city's four decades of "industrial and business growth" since the building of the ship channel to its huge postwar population influx. Further down that line stood the hundreds of new residential subdivisions like the ones Sharp announced on "Millionth Day." These communities succeeded because they met the needs and expectations of the professional Americans flocking to Houston and of those Houstonians looking to move out of the city to its environs.<sup>35</sup> *Newsweek* viewed the city's millionth person and the announcement of Sharpstown as evidence of the effectiveness of Houston's approach to development. According to the magazine, over the past fifty years Houston had advanced from a "piece of muddy nothing in the middle of nowhere," to a towering city that everyday looked more and more like "the shape and shadow of America's future."<sup>36</sup>

Oil, and the wealth it created, remained a key cog in Houston's economy and culture after the war, often influencing the development of new parts of the city. Oil-rich businessmen and major petroleum companies invested in the burgeoning medical center

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<sup>34</sup> "Sharp Announces Houston's Biggest Home Project," *Houston Post*, July 3, 1954, Box 34, Folder 1, GFC, SCLUH; "Metropolitan Houston Reaches 1 Million Population Figure" *Houston Post*, July 3, 1954, Box 34, Folder 1, GFC, SCLUH.

<sup>35</sup> "Metropolitan Houston Reaches 1 Million," *Houston Post*, July 3, 1954.

<sup>36</sup> "Greater Houston: Its First Million People—and Why," *Newsweek*, June 5, 1954, Box 35, Folder 12, GFC, SCLUH.

and bet heavily on suburban real estate development. As companies poured their resources into the city, they also injected the interests of their firms into Houston's future. When Humble Oil—which later became ExxonMobil—created a real estate subsidiary, Friendswood Development Corporation, in the late 1950s, the company directly connected its corporate interests to city and metropolitan growth. Humble executives pushed for highway access to their real estate holdings, supported laws that made development easier, and actively campaigned to bring the new National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) space center to Houston in the early 1960s. The siting of the center next to Friendswood's first major subdivision development created a financial windfall for the company.<sup>37</sup>

Oil companies were not alone in attempting to influence and gain from the Houston's growth. Corporations such as Prudential Insurance chose to build in the growing medical center area in hopes of gaining from early entry into what many believed would become a second downtown. Prudential's choice proved prescient; by 1960 the medical center contained over \$94 million of taxable value and another \$30 million was in development.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 10-11. On the oil industry's economic impact on the Houston area see Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region*. George Brown, as chair of Rice University's Board of Trustees played a key role in facilitating the bidding process for the NASA development. Humble Oil, now ExxonMobil, donated a huge chunk of land for the project and began to invest heavily in Houston real estate. On NASA, see Amy L. Bacon, "From West Ranch to Space City: A History of Houston's Growth Revealed through the Development of Clear Lake," (PhD Dissertation: University of Houston, 1996); Henry C. Dethloff, *Suddenly, Tomorrow Came...A History of the Johnson Space Center* (Washington, D.C.: NASA History Series, 1993); Kevin Michael Brady, "NASA Launches Houston Into Orbit: The Political, Economic, and Social Impact of the Space Agency on Southeast Texas, 1961 – 1969," (PhD Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2009). On the role of corporate development visions influencing the growth and shape of an urban area see Elihu Rubin, *Insuring the City: The Prudential Center and the Postwar Urban Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 5; See Pratt and Lipartito, *Baker and Botts*; Pratt and Buenger, *But Also Good Business* for a discussion of the role Houston's large law firms and banks played in shaping the city's development.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the medical center's development see "Houston: Where Growth Comes Naturally," 32; McComb, *Houston*, 241; Frederick Elliot, *The Birth of the Texas Medical Center: A Personal Account*, William Kellar, ed. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004). On the building of the Prudential Insurance Houston Regional Home Office see Rubin, *Insuring the City*, 50-57. Pratt and

Transportation, and the commerce it allowed, continued to hold a central place in the city's economic expansion after the war. By the late 1940s, Houston's port handled the second most cargo by weight in the United States, trailing only New York City, making it the center of trade in the American South. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had invested nearly \$50 million in widening and dredging the channel.<sup>39</sup> In the late 1950s, port officials predicted that the transportation hub would only continue to grow. Looking forward, port manager J.B. Turner declared that Houston would continue to be a "Doorway to the World." Indeed, as it had for decades before, the city and its port benefitted from their position at the tip of a funnel that collected the raw materials and trade products "from its own surrounding territories and the great hinterlands available to it," refined and repackaged them and then sent them into onto global markets.<sup>40</sup> In 1963, nearly 11 percent of the city's workforce was employed at the port or an ancillary business.<sup>41</sup>

Booming commerce and an expanding oil-based economy brought migrants to the city in droves. For decades prior to 1945, rural black Texans and Louisianans, ethnic Mexican immigrants from the Rio Grande Valley and northern Mexico, and white Americans from throughout Texas and the South came to the city for a variety of

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Buenger, *But Also Good Business* discuss the high level of real estate development banks invested in after World War II; Carl Abbott, "Real Estate and Race: Imagining the Second Circuit of Capital in Sunbelt Cities," in Darren Dochuk and Michelle Nickerson, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 265-289.

<sup>39</sup> Historic figures from the Port of Houston, <http://www.portofhouston.com/about-us/overview/>, last accessed October 29, 2013; "Port that Supports a City," *Houston*, May 1956, HMRC. The ship channel and port were also a part of the federally-constructed intercoastal waterway, which allowed barge traffic protection between the Atlantic seaboard and the Gulf of Mexico, see "The Intercoastal Waterway," *Time* October 1, 1956, Box 36, Folder 7, GFC, SCLUH.

<sup>40</sup> Port of Houston, "Welcome to the Port of Houston," 1957, Box 36, Folder 7, GFC, SCLUH. Will Clayton, one of the founding owners of Anderson, Clayton, and Company, a major cotton interest, referred to Houston as the tip of a funnel. See McComb, *Houston*, 112.

<sup>41</sup> McComb, *Houston*, 177.

reasons.<sup>42</sup> After the war, though, Harris County experienced greater raw population increases than it had in the 1920s and 1930s, when the city grew at its fastest rate because of the oil boom. Once again, oil was central to this movement. Jobs in refining, petrochemicals, engineering, and secondary industries drew hundreds of thousands to the city.<sup>43</sup> In addition to oil, the mass implementation of air conditioning, the expansion of manufacturing, and the suburban real estate boom contributed to the growth of Houston and other southern and southwestern cities.<sup>44</sup> The population of Houstonians of Mexican origin rose from 20,000 people in 1940 to more than 75,000 in 1960, an increase of 275 percent. The population of African Americans leapt from 86,000 to more than 215,000 by 1960, an increase of 150 percent. The white population of Harris County rose from 405,000 in 1940 to well over 918,000 by 1960, growing by more than 127 percent.<sup>45</sup> These three groups remained the most significant populations in the city until the late 1970s when large numbers of Asian, Middle Eastern, and Central American immigrants began to come to the city.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the prewar migration to Houston and its causes, see De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*; Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2001), 3-36; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993); Steptoe, "Dixie West."

<sup>43</sup> Pratt, *Growth of a Refining Region*, 83-85, 89-99; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 98-99.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Arsenault, "The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture," *The Journal of Southern History*, 50, No. 4 (Nov., 1984): 597-628.

<sup>45</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 98; Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station, Tex: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 23. US Census, <http://www.census.gov/>, last accessed December 2, 2013. Stephen Klineberg and the Center for Houston's Future, "An Historical Overview of Immigration in Houston, Based on the Houston Area Survey," Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University, 2008, available at <http://kinder.rice.edu/reports/>, last accessed December 2, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> See Victoria Hyonchu Kwon, *Entrepreneurship and Religion: Korean Immigrants in Houston, Texas* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997); Nestor Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston," in Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Nestor P. Rodriguez and Ximena Urrutia-Rojas, "Impact of Recent Refugee Migration to Texas: A Comparison of Southeast Asian and Central American Newcomers," in Wayne H. Holtzman and Thomas

As a result of chain migration, personal preference, and Houston's patterns of segregated housing, the majority of these migrants found homes in established racially homogenous neighborhoods.<sup>47</sup> A small percentage of African American and ethnic Mexican migrants took advantage of suburban developments or settled in working-class municipalities like Pasadena, but white migration to those areas dwarfed that of both groups. The vast majority of African American and ethnic Mexican migrants settled in or near the central city where they encountered vibrant, yet underserved, neighborhoods.

The central city neighborhoods that accommodated black and ethnic Mexican migrants most readily displayed the strain of the city's expanding population, but migration taxed Houston's entire infrastructure.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, officials scrambled to construct systems that could keep the city operating smoothly. The concentrated settlement patterns of black and ethnic Mexican communities also ensured that when highways cut through them that many residents would feel the consequences. Suburban areas, on the other hand, generally avoided significant disruption, allowing suburbanites to dodge most negative experiences with highways early on in their construction. While economic growth and higher rates of employment contributed to a larger tax base and brought national acclaim, the mass movement of people to Houston's suburbs also threatened the city's position as the most dominant city within the HMA. Houston officials worried that a failure to provide services to new subdivisions would result in these areas joining competing municipalities through annexation. This would

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H. Bornemann eds., *Mental Health of Immigrants and Refugees* (Austin: Hogg Foundation, 1990), 263-278.

<sup>47</sup> See Social Explorer and U.S. Census for Houston in 1950 and 1960, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed February 25, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> For conditions in Black and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods see Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Bullard, *Invisible Houston*; Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008); Robert D. Bullard, "Dumping on Houston's Black Neighborhoods," in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 207-223.

lead to Houston losing out on a chance to increase its tax base while helping a surrounding municipality grow. To avoid this outcome, officials worked closely with developers to create systems that could alleviate service problems. At the same time, city leaders expanded their annexation regimen to block the expansion of competing municipalities and turned to highway building to tie new developments to the city.<sup>49</sup>

By the mid-1950s suburban residential development had become one of Houston's most important industries. Real estate had been a major wealth creator for the city's developers for decades, but prior to the 1930s the majority of that investment remained focused in and around the central business district. As the city grew, suburban speculation rose. David Bintliff, a prominent financier and developer, for example, began building subdivisions in the 1920s. During the 1930s and 1940s, Bintliff bought and sold several ranch properties in the southwestern part of the city, eventually owning and selling the land that later became Sharpstown. As it became clear that Houston would continue to thrive in the postwar period, Bintliff and other developers eagerly snapped up land surrounding it that would eventually be annexed by Houston or form part of another municipality. By the late 1950s real estate was a primary driver of the city's economy and a huge wealth producer.<sup>50</sup>

The rush to develop the thousands of acres of farmland around Houston caused a significant change to the landscape of Harris County. Over a twenty-year period the county became progressively more urban as Houston expanded. The transition away from agricultural land use happened relatively quickly. Harris County reached the peak of its farm acreage in 1954 when 690,046 acres, about 60 percent of land in the county, was

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<sup>49</sup> Jon Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise on Post-Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited."

<sup>50</sup> David Bintliff, interview by Marguerite Johnson Barnes, April 1985, transcript, Box 1, Folder 9, Marguerite Johnson Barnes Collection, MSS 445, Woodson Research Center (WRC), Rice University. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*; Abbott, "Real Estate and Race."

part of one of its 3,869 farms. By 1974, after steady suburban development, the county housed 1,478 farms that covered 483,310 acres, less than 40 percent of the county's total area.<sup>51</sup> The expanding territory of Houston's corporate limits contributed to the shrinking of agriculture in Harris County. As Houston's population grew from 627,311 to 1,364,569 between 1940 and 1960, the city's jurisdictional boundaries expanded from seventy-three square miles to more than 340.<sup>52</sup> Within this increasingly large city, growth seemed to be occurring with little to no plan. Commenting on the nature of Houston's expansion in the 1950s, French journalist Pierre Voisin wrote that every developer "is doing just as he pleases, building here and there...Houston is spreading like a spilled bucket of water."<sup>53</sup>

Behind the seemingly relentless expansion of the city, though, real estate speculators and elected officials worked closely to put a number of governance systems in place to accommodate and regulate suburban growth.<sup>54</sup> Municipal utility districts represented one such structure. These districts permitted developers to take on debt in order to provide service infrastructure to subdivisions not connected to the city's networks. The creation of a special district required a vote of subdivision residents and the approval of the state legislature. Once a district existed, developers could finance improvements and pass on debt to residents through taxation and fees. Developers often

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<sup>51</sup> Farm numbers and acreage taken from the United State Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture: Texas for the years 1954 and 1974. <http://agcensus.mannlib.cornell.edu/AgCensus/homepage.do>, last accessed November 18, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Square mileage from Houston Planning Department, "Comprehensive Plan, 1959: 1c, Population, Land Use, and Growth," Box 1, Folder 5, City of Houston Planning Department Records (CHPD), RG A 004, HMRC, 106. Population figures from Martin Melosi, *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 161. Parts of the discussion of annexation and territorial expansion in this section is adapted from Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited."

<sup>53</sup> Voisin quoted in McComb, *Houston*, 199.

<sup>54</sup> For exploration of how the interplay between private companies and public officials shaped suburban development see, Paul G. Lewis, *Shaping Suburbia: How Political Institutions Organize Urban Development* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

abused this system by installing a friend or family member as the sole resident of an undeveloped subdivision, holding the “election,” which was guaranteed to pass, and then securing state approval. The Texas Legislature and local governments, far from stopping these abuses, encouraged them by approving districts whose elections occurred under dubious circumstances. Officials saw these entities as tools that could help stoke economic growth and operate as stopgaps for public service shortfalls. These districts blossomed around Houston after World War II, with sixty-two cropping up between 1949 and 1960, by far the most in any metropolitan area of the state.<sup>55</sup>

The advent of these districts led to the emergence of a common, yet problematic suburban growth pattern, what architect Lars Lerup, has termed leapfrog development.<sup>56</sup> This pattern emerged as developers built subdivisions in unincorporated areas with low land values instead of purchasing more expensive acreage next to existing subdivisions or within the city. This resulted in disconnected developments leapfrogging one another. This setup made the provision of essential services nearly impossible and drove growth well beyond Houston city limits. Texas annexation laws further contributed to the expansive nature of Houston’s development by requiring annexing cities to take on the indebtedness of the areas they absorbed. For developers, this meant that they rarely had to pay off the debts they took on through municipal utility districts. These entities helped Houston provide services to underserved areas, but they also added millions in debt to municipal budgets and exacerbated metropolitan planning problems because developers took little interest in integrating subdivisions into larger comprehensive plans. Once areas

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<sup>55</sup> Murray and Thomas, *Progrowth Politics*. John Mixon, interview by author, November 11, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Lars Lerup, *One Million Acres and No Zoning* (London: Architectural Association, 2011), 93-97.



were annexed, such lack of foresight created a number of headaches for planners, officials, and residents.<sup>57</sup>

Houston and its satellite towns all recognized that annexation offered one of the easiest ways to capitalize on the area's growth. The desire to control valuable areas precipitated a massive annexation competition that dominated metropolitan politics for the next two decades. Prior to 1963, any Texas home rule city had the power to annex land contiguous to its borders, a lax standard with the potential to inflame annexation battles. Before the war, no such competition existed because Houston's satellite towns were small and the development that occurred did so within areas clearly controlled by one municipality or another. This reality kept Houston in charge of metropolitan affairs and limited the use of annexation. However, Houston's satellite towns benefited from the same forces that propelled Houston's growth during the war. Between 1940 and 1950, several municipalities incorporated and preexisting towns, like Pasadena and La Porte, grew significantly. The expansion desires of these small cities presented roadblocks to Houston's growth.<sup>58</sup>

Recognizing that as neighboring municipalities grew they would begin to hem in Houston's metropolitan influence, city leaders acted on their advantages while they could. Between 1945 and 1958 the Houston City Council used annexation to absorb a huge amount of land, including nearly all the subdivision development that had occurred

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<sup>57</sup> G. Ross Stephens and Nelson Wikstrom, *Metropolitan Government and Governance: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Analysis, and the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12-13, 19, 129-133; Louise Dyble, *Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, and the Golden Gate Bridge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Eric H. Monkkonen, *The Local State: Public Money and American Cities* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995); Alberta Sbragia, *Debt Wish: Entrepreneurial Cities, US Federalism, and Economic Development* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). Dyble, Monkkonen, and Sbragia, discuss many of the abuses of power and poor planning that stem from extra-governmental entities like special districts, transit authorities, and utility companies. For a discussion of Houston's experiences with municipal utility districts and the dubious nature of some districts see John Mixon, interview by author, November 11, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Melosi, *Effluent America*, 161; Houston Planning Department, "Comprehensive Plan, 1959: 1c," 27.

beyond the city's boundaries during and immediately after the war. In 1948, approximately 85 percent of all subdivision platting occurred outside of the city limits.<sup>59</sup> Motivated to bring this development into the city and add it to its tax rolls the Houston City Council enacted the city's largest annexation ordinance to date in 1949, adding nearly 84 square miles of territory. The action brought 139,114 people into the city, and, just as importantly, prevented them from incorporating or joining another municipality. Even such a large action did not allow Houston to stay ahead of the area's growth, however. By 1956, Houston officials passed another annexation ordinance and this time they expanded the city limits by another 184.8 square miles.<sup>60</sup> With the two major actions Houston's jurisdictional territory more than quadrupled in less than a decade.<sup>61</sup>

In response to Houston's second large-scale annexation, several industrial cities along the ship channel—La Porte, Pasadena, and Deer Park—began employing annexation in order to stake their own claims to areas of valuable development. One typical move saw Deer Park and La Porte annex the land on which several chemical plants lay in an unincorporated part of Harris County, a move that added nearly \$250 million in assessable property values to their tax rolls.<sup>62</sup> The most direct challenge to Houston's control of the metropolitan area occurred in 1960, when Pasadena, La Porte, Deer Park, and Lomax simultaneously passed ordinances that annexed 106 square miles of southeast Harris County and allowed Pasadena to breakout of the territorial box Houston officials had purposefully placed around Pasadena in earlier annexations to contain the smaller city's growth. In the aftermath of this move area municipalities

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<sup>59</sup> Extra-city subdivision statistics from City of Houston Planning Commission, "Planning Commission Annual Report: 1957," Box 1, Folder 2, CHPD, HMRC.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> For a more in depth discussion of Houston's annexations and the politics surrounding them see Murray and Thomas, *Progrowth Politics*; Melosi, *Effluent America*, 190-205; McComb, *Houston*, 199-205.

<sup>62</sup> James Holley, "Two Cities Annex 7 Chem Plants," *Houston Post*, January 1, 1961, Box 38, Folder 10, GFC, SCLUH.

passed dozens of annexation orders prompting *Houston Post* journalist James Holley to note that “before the wave of annexation ceased,” most of Harris County and the surrounding five other counties, “had been blanketed by annexation ordinances.”<sup>63</sup>

The action of the smaller communities demonstrates the free-for-all nature of metropolitan growth in Houston during the 1950s and early 1960s. The competition complicated metropolitan planning efforts by turning neighboring municipalities into antagonists. Despite the fact that most disputes ended in Houston’s favor, small municipalities use of annexation demonstrated to Houston officials that they were no longer in complete control of the HMA. These conflicts presaged future negotiations and disagreements that would constitute the relationship between the city and its suburbs over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

Worried that the disruptive annexation battles could stymie metropolitan and statewide growth, state officials decided to enact legislation designed to end the competitions. Luckily for Houston officials, when the Texas Legislature passed the Municipal Annexation Act (MAA) of 1963, they gave Texas’ largest cities an advantage. The MAA quelled metropolitan annexation competition by assigning municipalities a defined extra-territorial jurisdiction (ETJ)—a territory outside of a city’s corporate limits which only that city could annex. The MAA determined ETJ sizes by population, which benefited large municipalities. The law established Houston’s control over all unincorporated or unclaimed land within five miles of its city limits and gave the city the right to expand its territory by ten percent each year.<sup>64</sup> Suburban communities had much

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<sup>63</sup> Murray and Thomas, *Progrowth Politics*, 151-158; James Holley, “Pasadena Takes in 78.12 Square Miles.” *Houston Post*, December 28, 1960, Box 38, Folder 8, GFC, SCLUH.

<sup>64</sup> Murray and Thomas, *Progrowth Politics*, 158; Melosi, *Effluent America*, 194; Stephens and Wikstrom, *Metropolitan Government*, 19, 47. Texas’ law was among the most liberal in terms of power given to large municipalities, see M.G. Woodroof III, “Systems and Standards of Municipal Annexation Review: A Comparative Analysis,” *Georgetown Law Review*, 1970 (58), 743-776.

smaller ETJs. With expansive new powers, Houston officials placed swaths of land into its ETJ, preventing suburban municipalities from encircling the city.

The MAA gave Houston the flexibility to avoid many of the problems other American cities confronted with their suburbs. Central cities across the nation competed with their bedroom communities for desirable territories, but few controlled as much territory or possessed the ability to claim more as freely as Houston. In other locations suburban incorporation led to intense levels of metropolitan fragmentation. Historians Colin Gordon and Robert O. Self document this process in St. Louis and Oakland, respectively. In both locations, suburban municipalities annexed nearly all the land surrounding the central city, preventing the larger entity from expanding geographically or economically. The resultant stagnation of development contributed to economic declines in both cities.<sup>65</sup> Houston's ability to annex land during the postwar decades gave the city remarkable flexibility in its expansion. After passage of the MAA, new incorporations dropped decidedly within Harris County because Houston controlled most of the remaining unincorporated land.<sup>66</sup> The MAA also allowed Houston to continue dominating metropolitan politics and development. After securing territory, Houston officials pushed for the construction of an effective highway system in order to consolidate that power.

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<sup>65</sup> Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). The same is true for Los Angeles, see Juliet F. Gainsborough, "Bridging the City-Suburb Divide: States and the Politics of Regional Cooperation," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 23, no. 5, (2001): 497-512. For a discussion of non-Houston annexation policies in Sunbelt cities see Olga Smirnova and Jeremy Ingalls, "Influence of State Annexation Laws on the Growth of Selected Southern Cities," *Southern Geographer* 47 (11) (May 2007): 83-97. For the importance of flexibility in annexation ability to city development see David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1993).

<sup>66</sup> James Holley, "29 Cities in County—and that May Be All," *Houston Post*, February 10, 1963, Box 38, Folder 5, GFC, SCLUH.

## **“TRAFFIC JAMS OR FREEWAYS”: BUILDING HOUSTON’S HIGHWAY SYSTEM<sup>67</sup>**

“Transportation in Houston is the story of the motor vehicle,” declared *Houston Post* journalist Jim Mathis in 1958. “The city is built, some say, around four wheels and a gas tank instead of people.”<sup>68</sup> While Mathis acknowledged the hyperbole in his statement, the underlying sentiment was not far from the truth. For all its roots in railroads and shipping, after 1940, Houston was an automobile city. By the late 1950s, observers seemed to have forgotten that streetcars, rail, and even horses had once used the streets of the now booming auto metropolis. No other aspect of Houston’s built environment so shaped the physical character of the city after 1945 as highways. As Houston grew into an international metropolis, so grew its highways.

As historian Christopher Wells points out, highways and automobiles did not foist themselves onto Americans nor was the construction of roads what led to the embrace of auto-suburbs. Rather, it was the choices Americans made to turn to car travel and the auto-centric strategies, policies, and incentives implemented by governments at every level that made cars central to American lives and landscapes.<sup>69</sup> While most Houstonians played little role in planning the initial elements of their road system, their embrace of automobiles necessitated its construction. In 1949 there were 290,000 registered vehicles in Harris County. By 1959, the number of registered vehicles had more than doubled to 607,000, a number that forced officials to build a system that could serve them.<sup>70</sup> Officials built a system that responded to citizen demand, but they also constructed it to meet their own desired outcomes, which were not necessarily aligned with those of all

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<sup>67</sup> Harris County Freeway Committee “Traffic Jams or Freeways” Pamphlet, H-Freeways-1950 VF, HMRC.

<sup>68</sup> Jim Mathis, “Flow: Traffic Moves Despite Bottlenecks,” *Houston Post*, January 26, 1958, H-Traffic 1950-1979 VF, HMRC.

<sup>69</sup> Wells, *Car Country*.

<sup>70</sup> Registration numbers from Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 19; Thomas Watson McKinney, “Superhighway Deluxe: Houston’s Gulf Freeway” (PhD Dissertation: University of Houston, 2006), 32.

city residents. For Houston's elected officials, businessmen, and developers this meant building a system that could keep the city physically growing and commerce moving—and them in power. To meet those ends city and state highway planners built roads that tied the growing suburbs and industrial areas to the central city, allowing suburban workers to access the central business district with ease. They also laid out roadways to serve the Port of Houston, the ship channel, and the NASA center. While these roads afforded commuters and suburbanites a great deal of mobility, there were drawbacks. Some highways cut central city neighborhoods in two, creating new boundaries and restricting access to various parts of town, as happened in the Fifth Ward. Coupled with the decline of public transit, the suburb-centric construction of roadways resulted in some Houstonians becoming more immobile even as more transportation structures were built.

Many Houston leaders viewed road construction and annexation as interlocking processes. Every mile of road constructed between the burgeoning suburban developments and the city allowed Houston to draw its outlying communities in and brought officials' vision of an interconnected metropolitan area, with Houston at its helm, closer to reality. City leaders promoted metropolitan connectivity as key to development and argued that major projects like “highways, freeways, major thoroughfares, major drainage channels, and flood control projects” could bind the HMA together.<sup>71</sup> Roads held a key position in bringing new business to the HMA as well. After World War II, relocating corporations—especially the all-important industrial concerns coming to the ship channel area—demanded road access.<sup>72</sup> Road development also presented businesses whose headquarters sat in the central business district with a new set of challenges. Executives from these companies recognized the necessity of expanding into suburban

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<sup>71</sup> Houston Planning Department, “Comprehensive Plan, 1959: 1c,” 42-47.

<sup>72</sup> Houston Chamber of Commerce, “Houston Highlights #23: Highway System,” November 1962, H-Freeways 1960s VF, HMRC.

areas but also hoped to use roads to help stem the adverse effects of decentralization and inject energy back into downtown.<sup>73</sup> Local elected leaders and their professional staffs worked in concert with state and national highway officials to formulate Houston's highway system during the 1940s and 1950s. As they constructed the system, these leaders followed the contours put in place by Houston's economic growth, the interests of powerful developers and elites, and the mobility needs of its suburbanizing population.

The first major highway to open in Houston was the Gulf Freeway (now Interstate 45), which connected Houston and Galveston. Discussion of the roadway began in the 1930s, but action on the road's construction did not start until the end of World War II, after passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1944 earmarked adequate funding. Construction began in 1946 and the road opened in 1952.<sup>74</sup> The building of the Gulf Freeway set a number of precedents for the future development of Houston and its roadways. The highway was immensely popular; so many drivers used it that within three years the road had reached its capacity and was often congested.<sup>75</sup> Further, the freeway gave Houstonians a sense of how highways could benefit the city and their individual mobility. Its construction signaled Houstonians' embrace of roads and oriented their transportation choices towards road building for several decades. Traffic snarls on the freeway elicited calls for expansion from citizens and officials alike, refrains that would accompany every new road project. The freeway also demonstrated to developers how valuable road access could be, as property values rose considerably along the roadway

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<sup>73</sup> Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution*, 45-59; Robert Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 315-316; Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166-202.

<sup>74</sup> For further information about the origins, construction, and significance of the Gulf Freeway see McKinney, "Superhighway Deluxe"; Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 144-165.

<sup>75</sup> Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 151.

and housing developments quickly sold out.<sup>76</sup> Finally, the road became a national trendsetter for engineering and planning standards with its six lanes of at-grade traffic and frontage roads.<sup>77</sup>

The construction and success of the Gulf Freeway spurred city, county, and state leaders to build a larger network of highways in and around Houston. The city's rampant growth brought a sense of urgency to this planning. In a 1954 editorial in the Houston Chamber of Commerce's monthly publication, *Houston*, Director of Transportation Eugene Maier called for a concerted effort to build new roads. Postwar growth, Maier maintained, had created service demands well above what "even the most imaginative public officials" could have forecast. Car registrations, population, and the size of the city all increased by huge margins during the early 1950s. Maier contended that a serious investment in highways might help alleviate the pressures created by these changes.<sup>78</sup> Scrambling to bring an effective system to the metropolitan area, state and local officials jointly approved the plans for a regional highway network in 1954 and announced it publicly in 1955.<sup>79</sup> (See Figure 1.1)

Financing the system presented officials with their next hurdle. Unlike the Gulf Freeway, the metropolitan highway plan upon its inception lacked a consistent funding stream. The City of Houston attempted to pass several bond issues to raise money for

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<sup>76</sup> An influential report, Norris and Elder Consulting Engineers, "A 15-year Study of Land Values and Land Use Along the Gulf Freeway, Houston, TX 1956," City of Houston Traffic Engineering, City Planning Records—RG 0942, Box 45/75/B, HMRC. Commissioned by the Texas Highway Department the report was instrumental in documenting the value and effect of the freeway on Houston's economic landscape. "Prospect of Freeway Causes Property Values to Spurt Up," *Houston Post*, August 11, 1957, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC; "Program to the formal opening of the Gulf Freeway, August 2, 1952," Box 29, Folder 1, GFC, SCLUH.

<sup>77</sup> McKinney, "Superhighway Deluxe"; "Freeway Guinea Pig For State, US study," *Houston Post*, June 28, 1950, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC.

<sup>78</sup> Eugene Maier, "Success Must Be Planned," *Houston* November 1954, H-Traffic 1950-1979 VF, HMRC.

<sup>79</sup> Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 11-15; "12 Major Freeways Planned for Houston," *Houston Press*, September 8, 1953, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC.



right-of-way purchases and construction costs, but had mixed results as residents weighed the inconvenience of traffic against that of higher taxes.<sup>80</sup> The State of Texas had accrued a large nest egg for road maintenance during the war by not spending on new projects, but could not foot the bill for the entire system.<sup>81</sup>



Figure 1.1: 1954 Highway Map

This map shows the original highway plans for the city. This map shows the Inner Loop, now 610, and several spoke highways including the Dallas and Gulf Freeway (I-45) from the lower right corner to upper middle, the Southwest/Eastex Freeways (US 59), and Katy and Port Arthur Highways (I-10). City of Houston Planning Department, City of Houston Annual Report 1954, CHPD, HMRC.

<sup>80</sup> The city passed several bond elections, but also failed a number of times. The September 17, 1955 election to create a wheel tax passed, only to be deemed unconstitutional. See Oscar Holcombe Collection, MSS 20, Box 6, Folder 10, HMRC. For a full account of the bonds see Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 144-165.

<sup>81</sup> McKinney, "Superhighway Deluxe," 14-35.

Only the passage of the federal Interstate Highway Act in 1956 brought funding stability to the regional road network. This act allowed officials from the State of Texas and Houston to purchase most of the required interstate right-of-way and begin construction on metropolitan roadways. Representing an even larger federal investment than the ship channel, the original cost estimate for Houston's section of the interstate system was \$243 million, a number that indicated the breadth of Houston's road building project and represented nearly half of the allotment the state of Texas was scheduled to receive.<sup>82</sup> Interstate funding also freed up local and state money for dedication to secondary highways and roads. The financial floodgates opened in the half-decade after the act's passage. Counting expenditures from all levels of government, more than \$305,300,000 was spent on Houston area roadways from 1956 to 1961.<sup>83</sup>

As road planning and construction began, Houston business leaders recognized the importance of locating branches along or near the new roads. Executives from the city's largest companies contemplated decentralizing their operations and worked closely with the developers of suburban shopping centers and local officials to ensure that their secondary locations would benefit from proximity to highways. When Foley's Department Store decided to branch into the growing suburbs, for example, it opened direct lines of communication to the Texas Highway Department and to a privately owned bus company in order to ensure that its new location would be linked with the city's transportation system. Foley's leadership joined with Sharpstown founder Frank Sharp to push for the extension of a bus route down to the newly opened Sharpstown mall.<sup>84</sup> They also monitored the construction status and changes to the Southwest

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<sup>82</sup> McComb, *Houston*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> Houston Harris County Transportation Plan, Volume 3, Box 16, Folder 26, Foley's Department Store Collection (FDSC), 07/2007-004, SCLUH.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Charles Florian to Bernard Calkins, July 7, 1961, Box 17, Folder 22, FDSC, SCLUH.

Freeway as it was built in the early 1960s, wanting to ensure that the road would adequately serve its branch store.<sup>85</sup> When they scouted for a store in the southeastern part of the city, Foley's officials concentrated only on sites that abutted the Gulf Freeway.<sup>86</sup>

No part of the metropolitan area captured the economic and physical changes brought by the first stages of highway construction better than the Clear Lake area, southeast of the city. When the federal government and NASA announced the siting of the Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC) in Clear Lake in 1960, the area immediately became a hotbed for real estate development and jumped up the priority list for infrastructure expansion. The desirability of the area kicked off the annexation fight between Houston and Pasadena discussed earlier.<sup>87</sup> The MSC decision was a boon to the Friendswood Development Corporation, which owned thousands of acres nearby and quickly announced plans to develop Clear Lake City, a residential community that would house and serve the predominantly white, professional MSC workers and their families. The growth potential of the MSC, Friendswoods's Clear Lake City, and another Humble project, the Bayport Industrial Park, drove development around Clear Lake skyward in the early 1960s.

The MSC and Clear Lake City developments necessitated an overhaul of the area's highways and thoroughfares. The construction of these roads modeled the way officials used the structures to control the direction of metropolitan growth. In 1960, the Clear Lake area had a single two-lane market road and only the Gulf Freeway provided

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<sup>85</sup> "Office memo" October 11, 1961, Box 17, Folder 22, FDSC, SCLUH; Letter from Vance Newell, Max Jacobs Agency, to Max Levine, Foley's President, September 22, 1958, Box 17, Folder 22, FDSC, SCLUH.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from KE Antone, Main Street Realty, to Robert W. Dundas, n.d., Box 19, Folder 25, FDSC, SCLUH; Foley's Research Department, "Southeast Houston—Galveston Area," Store Research Report, August 1962, Box 19, Folder 13, FDSC, SCLUH.

<sup>87</sup> For more on this fight see Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited." For more on the history of Clear Lake and the changes that development brought to the area see Bacon, "From West Ranch to Space City."

highway access. As part of the MSC's construction, NASA teamed with the State Highway Department to build NASA Road 1 and connect the MSC directly to the Gulf Freeway. (See Figure 1.2) Even with this roadway complete, the State Highway Department believed that the road network in the NASA area would need to be drastically expanded to serve workers and residents. Early in 1963, the department instituted a \$100 million improvement plan to build "a network of good roads radiating in all directions" away from the MSC. Recognizing that many workers at the MSC and nearby industries would "prefer living away from the congestion of [the center's] immediate vicinity," highway officials offered a road plan that could easily bring commuting workers in from the surrounding suburban communities and even Houston itself.<sup>88</sup> Included in the plan were several other state highways that would crisscross the Clear Lake area and connected commuters to the Gulf Freeway.

The roads built to service the MSC area altered the landscape of southeastern Harris County. As the secondary highways and thoroughfares were developed around and near the MSC, real estate speculation escalated and land values rose just as they had upon completion of the Gulf Freeway.<sup>89</sup> Formerly small coastal towns like Kemah, Seabrook, and Taylor Lake quickly became larger communities filled with MSC workers.<sup>90</sup> These communities promoted their road access to both

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<sup>88</sup> "NASA Traffic Crisis," *Houston Post*, January 22, 1963, Box 3K405, Folder 1, DeWitt Greer Papers (DGP), DBCAH.

<sup>89</sup> "Houston: Boomingest Town in the US," *Newsweek* June 11, 1962, Box 35, Folder 12, GFC, SCLUH.

<sup>90</sup> Jim Maloney, "People Replace Pastures," *Houston Post*, June 28, 1970, Box 35, Folder 6, GFC, SCLUH.



Figure 1.2: NASA Road 1

Construction of the Manned Spacecraft Center and NASA Road 1 occurred simultaneously as officials knew the MSC would need adequate road access. Texas Department of Transportation, Communications Division, Media Production, Photo Library, Jack Lewis, photographer, April 1, 1963.

the MSC and Houston as a primary reason to purchase a home in the community.<sup>91</sup> Road expansion in the Clear Lake area was typical of the entire HMA. The expanded road network linked the city's suburbs to Houston physically, economically, and cognitively. The roadways and the mobility they offered accelerated the dispersal of the metropolitan region by allowing Clear Lake and other suburbs to draw businesses and residents away from those parts of the metropolitan area less connected to the region's roadways.

At the same time that Houstonians were busily building up a road network, their once effective mass transit system was falling apart. As more Houstonians relied on cars for their daily mobility, fewer had reason to support mass transit. Like many other American cities throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Houston witnessed increasing numbers

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<sup>91</sup> Timber Cove Community Pamphlet, 1958, Timber Cove Collection #2011-0008, University of Houston-Clear Lake Archives.

of citizens voting with their feet and pocketbook: foregoing mass transit and blocking measures to expand it.<sup>92</sup> These decisions, and the decline in transit service that accompanied them, created problems for Houstonians who relied on the cheap mobility of the bus system to reach jobs, recreation, and other essential services. The city's streetcars ceased operation in 1940. Bus service peaked in 1947. Through the 1950s ridership fell and the private bus companies found themselves struggling financially.<sup>93</sup> With service declining on private buses, some discussion of creating a public transit authority began. This conversation, though, faced two obstinate realities. First, similar to zoning proposals, many Houstonians and elected officials viewed public ownership of transit as an unwanted form of government intervention. Second, the majority of city, county, and state officials, as well as citizens, saw highways as the unquestioned future of the city's transportation system. While some Houstonians discussed the possibility and merits of mass transit systems, gathering the necessary momentum for the creation of a publically owned mass transit system seemed nearly impossible in the late 1950s and early 1960s with highway-centric attitudes dominating the conversation.<sup>94</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The combination of highway construction and outward urban growth in the 1950s and early 1960s drastically reshaped the Houston metropolitan area. Simultaneous suburban and highway development meant that non-central homes would remain tied to roadways and the city. The declining distance between individual Houstonians and the nearest highway marked the physical change highways brought to both suburban

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<sup>92</sup> David W. Jones, *Mass Motorization: Mass motorization + Mass Transit: An American History and Policy Analysis* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 99-101.

<sup>93</sup> Jim Mathis, "Flow: Traffic Moves Despite Bottlenecks" *Houston Post* January 26, 1958, H-Traffic 1950-1979 VF, HMRC.

<sup>94</sup> "Freeways Alone Not the Answer," *Houston Chronicle*, May 27, 1961, H-Transportation-1920-1960s VF, HMRC.

communities like Clear Lake City and to central Houston. In 1960, 95 percent of Houstonians lived no more than 7.5 miles away from a freeway. Accounting for the roads that were under construction and looking forward to include future additions, projections concluded that by 1980, that distance would drop to 2.5 miles.<sup>95</sup> This number presaged the central place roads would come to inhabit in Houston's built environment within the next thirty years. As more and more roads were built and the highway network took shape, car rides and lane lines became a part of everyday life for most Houstonians.

Houston's pre- and postwar growth owed much to the city's geographic position on a flat, easily developable plain and to leading Houstonians' ability to capitalize on that position through adroit business practices and economic expansion. The choices of Houston's elected leaders and elites to transform their natural landscape to serve their purposes, whether dredging Buffalo Bayou to make it into the Ship Channel or linking subdivisions to the city with highways, also helped the city grow. The city's leaders were instrumental in directing Houston into and through the postwar period upon a wave of expansion. Whether elected officials or economic elites, Houston's wealthiest and most powerful residents held tight to the reins of the city's growth and applied their vision of mobility to the city as a whole. The rest of Houston's citizens, though, were not powerless. Just as they pushed for roads through their purchase of cars and demand for mobility around the metropolitan area, as the city grew and prospered, non-elite Houstonians influenced its path. Highway development and mass transit debates that took place over the ensuing three decades of the city's history offered citizens an avenue to assert their own ideas about the shape of the city, their rights to determine its future, and their conceptions of mobility. The remaining chapters weave these two strands—

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<sup>95</sup> Houston Metropolitan Area Transportation Study Office, "Existing Street Network," 1966, City of Houston Traffic Engineering, City Planning Records, RG 0942, Box 45/75/B, HMRC.

transportation structures and their place in struggles for political power—together. This will start with Chapter Two, which shows that as the highway department poured footings and planned overpasses, Houstonians became increasingly aware of how the roads they sought and celebrated would change their lives for better or worse.



## **Chapter Two Whose Highways? Planning, Politics, and Consequences**

In May 1962, flyers appeared under the front doors of homes in Memorial Bend, a white upper-middle-class Houston subdivision several miles northwest of downtown. A plat map of the neighborhood framed the top third of the page. A thick red line ran through the middle of ordered properties and over the top of several cul-de-sacs. “Attention Homeowners and Taxpayers,” the headline read. “Are you aware that the City Planning Commission and Harris County are putting an eight-lane freeway, similar to the Gulf Freeway, through the Bend?”<sup>1</sup> Concerned neighbors dropped the flyers at every home in Memorial Bend. Others spread the word through neighboring subdivisions. By the time the residents came before the Houston Planning Commission a month later they held a petition against the highway signed by more than 1000 area residents.<sup>2</sup>

About that same time, across the city in the Fifth Ward, the predominantly African American community that sat just a few miles from downtown Houston, a hammering noise roused Ramona Toliver from her home. Standing on her front porch, a startled Toliver found the source of the noise when she observed a Texas Highway Department surveyor driving several orange-flagged staves into her front yard. The markers came up just short of her front door and sat on both sides of her garage, drawing a line right through its middle. Toliver confronted the surveyor, who reported that the staves marked the outer edge of the new interstate that would soon be coming through the ward. The surveyor informed her that her house and garage stood in the projected path and that some, if not all of her property, would need to be taken to make way for the road.

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<sup>1</sup> “Attention Homeowners and Taxpayers” Flyer, May 1962, City of Houston Planning Department Records (CHPD), Erik Slotboom Research Collection (ESRC).

<sup>2</sup> Houston City Planning Commission Minutes, June 5, 1962, Box 2, Folder 5, V.P. Ringer Collection (VRC), MSS 143, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC).

This was the first Toliver had heard of the interstate; “[T]hey didn’t really announce it,” she recalled. Frustrated, Toliver demanded that the worker get his supervisor and an explanation.<sup>3</sup>

As construction commenced on the ambitious highway system that city and state officials laid out in their 1955 plan, variations of these two scenes played out across the HMA. For the first time, citizens came face to face with the roadways they helped bring to fruition over the previous decade with their purchase of automobiles and their political support for roads. As officials announced the location of highways, however, many Houstonians learned that their homes and neighborhoods stood in the way. No longer dreaming of a potential system, but instead confronting an accumulation of alarming developments, citizens voiced growing concerns about highways starting in the late 1950s. While residents from every walk of life confronted the costs of roadway construction, a small subset, those whose homes fell in or near the path of the roads, absorbed a preponderance of the negative effects. An accrual of consequences pushed these Houstonians to insist that plans be altered to save their homes and led others to call for an outright halt on road construction. However, the majority of Houstonians, powerful real estate developers, and city officials continued to push for new and wider roads. The tension among these viewpoints served to split Houstonians into two camps: those who generally supported road construction and those who opposed its unchecked expansion. Settling this debate took decades and the process became increasingly fraught as non-elite white, black, and ethnic Mexican Houstonians claimed more political power in the city’s decision-making. Through this conflict, Houstonians displayed competing visions for the future of the city’s transportation network and attempted to put their ideas of the politics of mobility to work in ways that matched those visions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording.

In the 1950s, Houstonians who attended Houston Planning Commission meetings to protest route plans or demanded to speak to construction foremen to argue about property lines bumped against the reality that they possessed little control over the city's direction of growth. Because city officials and land developers carried out highway planning far removed from citizen oversight, Houstonians who questioned the city's approach to road building struggled to gain traction in early transportation debates. Officials possessed definitive ideas about how roads would benefit the city and what shape those roads should take.<sup>4</sup> Their notions rarely matched those forwarded by the citizens who protested the routes. At the same time that elected officials ignored the desires of citizens, they adhered closely to those of national groups—automobile manufacturers, the trucking industry, and drivers' advocacy organizations like AAA—and to local developers and business leaders whose interests were intimately tied to road construction.<sup>5</sup> In this regard Houston was not an anomaly. Across the nation during the 1950s, officials from the national, state, and local level planned and implemented thousands of miles of highways and interstates with little citizen input.

The structure of the Interstate Highway Act, passed in 1956, encouraged officials to continue prioritizing urban expansion over the concerns of residents who stood in the way of roads.<sup>6</sup> The act codified the power local and state leaders held in planning the

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013); Amy Finstein, "Lofty Visions: The Architectural Intentions and Contrary Realities of Elevated Urban Highways in America, 1900 -1959," (PhD Diss., University of Virginia, 2009.)

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 1988); Mark H. Rose, Paul Barrett, and Bruce Seely, *The Best Transportation System in the World: Railroads, Trucks, Airlines, and American Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006). On Houston power brokers see Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 121-133.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Abbott, *Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993); Jon C. Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). City officials did not want to lose influence over the metro region. Visible in attempts to create cultural institutions in the downtown area that can draw suburban residents

nation's roadways by giving them complete control over routing decisions within urban areas.<sup>7</sup> It also provided a federal-local funding structure, which guaranteed that the federal government would cover ninety percent of all interstate costs. This made interstates more palatable for localities that were wary of taking on debt. Because of the financial support attached to interstates, state officials concentrated on those projects and passed the costs for local highway and infrastructure development onto county and city governments. As Chapter One demonstrated, the territorial and population growth of the postwar period had already stretched Houston's ability to meet the infrastructure demands of the city. The added burden of local road maintenance led city officials to devote the limited resources they did possess to building and maintaining routes that connected downtown to the suburbs or that served wealthier, more politically influential populations. These choices led to the continued neglect of transportation infrastructure in the poorest central city neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter will consider four road projects located in two distinct parts of Houston—the quickly expanding, almost exclusively white, west side and the densely populated downtown Third and Fifth Wards, which in the 1950s and early 1960s, contained the majority of the city's African American population. The west side of the city confronted the construction of Houston's second ring road, the Outer Belt. Routes for Houston's two bisecting interstates ran through the Third and Fifth Wards. These projects

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into downtown, see Kyle Shelton "Culture War in Downtown Houston: Jones Hall and the Postwar Battle over Exclusive Space," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 116 (1) (July 2012): 1-24.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Rose and Raymond Mohl, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-2000* 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 85-111; Tom Watson McKinney, "Superhighway Deluxe: Houston's Gulf Freeway," in Martin Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> Owen Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kyle Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited: Path-dependent Annexation and Highway Practices in an American Metropolis," *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 4 (1) (March 2014): 97-115.

not only demonstrated the physical impact roads brought to the areas through which they ran, but also reflected the range of reactions these structures elicited from Houstonians that lived there. As these examples will show, citizens had to struggle to be heard during the first stages of the construction process. Despite these difficulties, residents' initial responses anticipated later calls for participation in city planning and, eventually, outright resistance to road projects.

The routing and construction of highways through already settled parts of the city guaranteed that the roads would influence the lives of nearly all Houstonians. This counters the commonly held notion that the consequences of road construction fell solely onto the shoulders of disadvantaged groups. However, suburban and centrally located roads exacted very different costs on the parts of the city they crossed. It is undeniable that some residents confronted more severe consequences of road construction and that those residents were overwhelmingly poorer and usually black or ethnic Mexican.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, it is clear that officials dealt with the complaints they received from Houstonians from different parts of the city in different ways.

The timeframes for the construction of these road projects created divergent experiences for the Houstonians who confronted them. The highways planned for predominantly white suburbs were more often than not projected routes that would not be built for decades. Rather than facing immediate displacement, suburban residents had time to plan for a road's presence or to contest its location. Because these residents possessed significant political and economic resources, their complaints, even if ultimately rejected, gained the attention of city and county officials. The Texas Highway Department, on the other hand, deemed Houston's downtown interstates priorities. As

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Lin, "Ethnic Places, Postmodernism, and Urban Change in Houston," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36, No. 4 (Autumn, 1995): 629-647.

such, officials planned and constructed them quickly, often before citizen responses could coalesce. The consequences of immediate construction were dramatic because new highways divided neighborhoods and displaced thousands of residents. Black Houstonians, the population overwhelmingly affected by Houston's interstate construction, possessed little political power when planning and construction began in the 1950s. They nonetheless railed against the negative consequences caused by the roadways. While questions of electoral access and fights against segregation continued to dominate the focus of Houston's iteration of the Civil Rights Movement, black Houstonians, like African Americans across the country, also contested problems of physical infrastructure, housing, and transportation. African Americans increasingly labeled such problems "environmental" issues and they would only become more prominent in later years.<sup>10</sup>

Acknowledging the widespread, yet uneven, impact of infrastructure projects is essential to understanding how Houstonians conceptualized and engaged with the city's politics of mobility after World War II. While the consequences of road building ranged in severity, the citizens affected by highways all felt wronged by the process. With the effects of the first stage of highway construction providing a common motivation, a diverse array of Houstonians expressed frustration with the city's top-down development approach and agitated for a larger role in city planning. The expectations Houstonians

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<sup>10</sup> On examples of protests about infrastructure problems and unequal access to transportation in Memphis, Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 204-5. On Atlanta, Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). On similar earlier fights in Houston, Guadalupe San Miguel, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987); Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).

brought to this push varied. White residents, particularly suburbanites, wanted to easily access the city in private automobiles and aimed to protect their homes from future road projects. African American and ethnic Mexican residents of central Houston shared those desires with white Houstonians, but also made transportation inequality—in terms of both planning and provision—a central focus of their ongoing civil rights agendas.<sup>11</sup>

## THE ROAD PROJECTS

The first two projects this chapter discusses revolve around the western segment of Houston's second ring road, the Outer Loop (now State Highway 8). The original design for the road, which appeared on Houston-area highway plans in the early 1950s, called for it to encircle the city about twelve miles from downtown. Anticipating a road that would eventually be four lanes wide, city and county officials required that all developing subdivisions reserve a right-of-way of 150 feet for the road. The Memorial Bend Addition, platted in 1954, followed this requirement and commenced selling lots in 1955. By 1960, however, officials decided that projections of the city's growth required an expansion of previous road plans. They implemented new regulations that expanded the Outer Belt's right-of-way to 300 feet and applied this width to already developed subdivisions. Plans that called for this width projected that it would allow for the eventual construction of a six-lane, at-grade highway. In Memorial Bend, this right-of-way would

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<sup>11</sup> Many scholars have shown the massive impact infrastructure construction wrought on black and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods—Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*; DiMento and Ellis, *Changing Lanes*; Joshua Cannon, “Huntsville, the Highway, and Urban Redevelopment: The Long Road to Connect Downtown Huntsville, Alabama to the Interstate Highway System,” *Journal of Planning History* 11 (1) (2012): 27-46. Others have shown the changes brought to white or wealthier neighborhoods: Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Christopher W. Wells, “From Freeway to Parkway: Federal Law, Grassroots Environmental Protest, and the Evolving Design of Interstate-35E in Saint Paul, Minnesota” *Journal of Planning History* 11 (1) (2012): 8-26. Addressing these two focuses together is essential to understanding citywide transportation politics and decision-making. McKinney, in “Superhighway Deluxe,” acknowledges the fact that the Gulf Freeway had a negative impact on the property of both wealthy and poorer Houstonians, 158.

claim as many as 30 homes. Residents of the community, nearly all middle- and upper-class whites, objected to the plan. Citing their original plats and claiming that the road would lower their property values, many actively campaigned against the expansion. While they were ultimately unsuccessful, their pressure led the Houston City Council and Houston Planning Commission to consider their complaints.

A second set of Outer Belt decisions in west Houston demonstrated the amount of influence developers held at this time. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, developers R.E. Smith and Roy Hofheinz encouraged the Houston Planning Commission and the Harris County Commissioners Court to realign several parts of the Outer Belt. Smith and Hofheinz exemplified Houston's elite. Each possessed a great deal of political influence and personal wealth. Hofheinz served terms as both Houston mayor and Harris County commissioner prior to his move into development. Smith owned real estate throughout the metropolitan area and in the mid-1950s he was one of Houston's richest residents. Like developers before and after them, Hofheinz and Smith brought their economic and political power to bear on local decision-makers like the county court to seek alterations to the planning of the Outer Belt in ways that benefitted their interests. Contrasted with their dismissal of concerns from residents of Memorial Bend and the complete neglect of African American opinion in interstate planning, local officials gave quick and positive responses to these developers, reflecting the power they possessed.

The other two projects involved the construction of Interstates 10 and 45 through downtown Houston. The routes for these roads ran directly through the central city Third and Fifth Wards. Despite the fact that the two wards and their respective main streets—Dowling Street and Lyons Avenue—represented significant centers of black economic, political, and social life, officials made few attempts to prevent detrimental outcomes in these areas. The roads altered the physical landscape of both neighborhoods to a much



greater degree than the Outer Belt did in Memorial Bend or in other outlying areas. The changes forced residents of the wards to redefine their understandings of and connections to their communities. The roads also negatively affected the economic structures of both Wards, disrupting businesses and displacing many of the residents who patronized them.<sup>12</sup>

Planning and construction for Interstate 10 from Loop 610 to downtown occurred between 1956 and 1966. The two miles of the road between Lockwood Drive and U.S. 59, which was a depressed, below-grade highway of six lanes, displaced more than 330 residences and businesses in the Fifth Ward. Construction on the northern end of Interstate 45, entering into downtown, followed the route of the original Gulf Freeway that opened in the late 1940s. Most of its route through the Third Ward was completed by 1965, remaining at-grade for most of its path. Only a six-lane elevated section running between Dowling Street on the east and Allen Parkway on the west, known as the Pierce Elevated, and the interchange with State Highway 59 were constructed after 1965. The Pierce Elevated opened to traffic in 1967 and for the first time allowed highway users to go east-west through Houston without driving on city streets. At just over 3 miles long, the stretch of I-45 that included Pierce Elevated and ran from downtown to Scott Street on the east side of the Third Ward displaced nearly 560 residences and businesses.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bullard, *Invisible Houston*, 30-31. For a discussion of the significance of the Third and Fifth Wards and their main drags to the black community of Houston, see Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*.

<sup>13</sup> Displacement figures from Houston Chamber of Commerce, "Houston's Regional Mobility: Plans into Action; North Corridor and Hardy Road," July 1982, Box 1, Folder 8, RG F 18, Hardy Street Toll Road Controversy Collection (HSTCC), Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), 14. For detailed information on the completion dates and projects of the Houston area highways see Erik Slotboom, *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey* (Cincinnati, OH: C.J. Krehbiel, 2003).

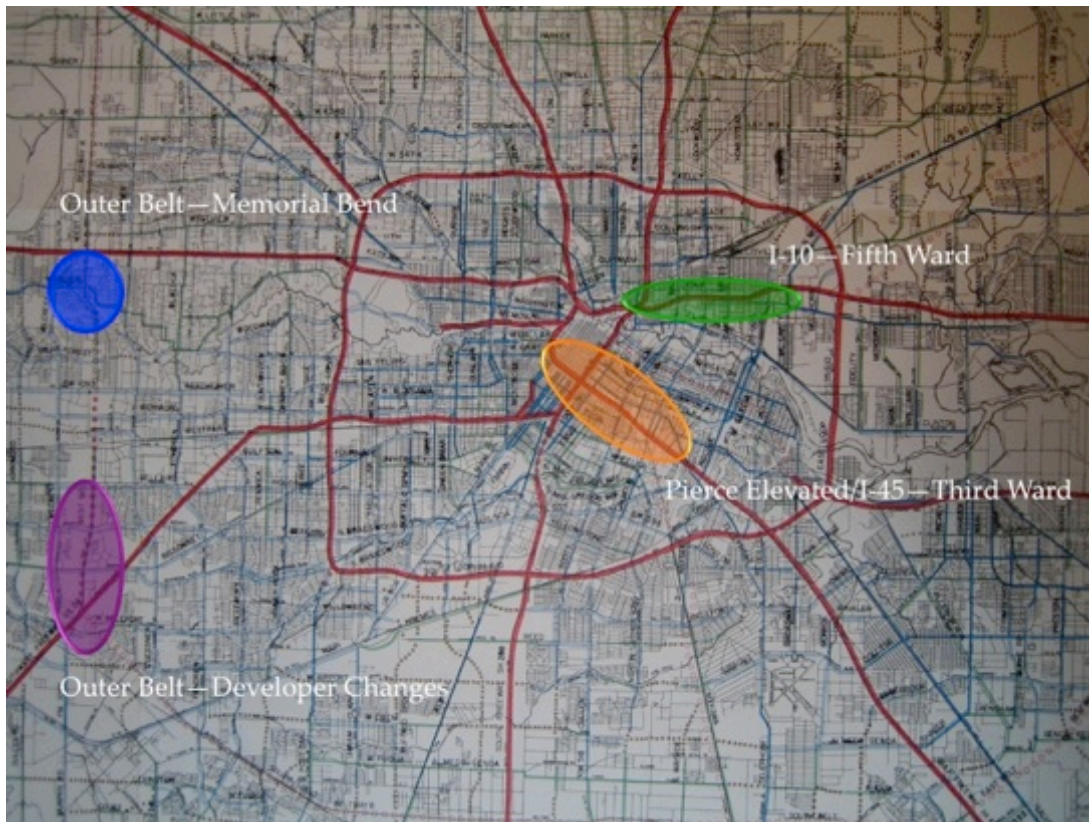


Figure 2.1: Map of Houston with 1960s Focus Areas

This map of Houston area highways highlights the locations of the four projects discussed in this chapter. The blue and purple circles cover the westside highway projects on the Outer Belt. Blue is Memorial Bend and the purple is the area around the Outer Belt/US 59 Intersection. The orange covers Pierce Elevated and I-45 through the Third Ward. Green is I-10 through the Fifth Ward. Background map is “Status of Freeways” Houston-Galveston Regional Transit Study, 1984, Transportation Map Drawer TXR MC B3, HMRC.

These four projects (Figure 2.1) exemplify several larger trends taking place in Houston during the 1960s and cover several of the experiences Houstonians’ had with road construction. What these examples show is that up through the late 1960s, when it came to highway decisions city and county governments prioritized official plans and the desires of development and real estate interests over the concerns of nearly all other private citizens. Only when Houstonians from across the metropolitan area rallied against the consequences of such top-down planning in their communities would this reality shift.

## **THE OUTER BELT**

Construction on the Outer Belt was not to begin until future suburban growth demanded it. Only a small number of homeowners in the right-of-way saw their homes immediately taken, so while the threat of the road was real for most residents, it was also distant. Despite these tempered effects, suburbanites in areas such as Memorial Bend considered the placement of the roads to be onerous and unfair. Residents moved to Memorial Bend with the goal of finding a peaceful neighborhood far from the noise and traffic of the central city. The projected road thwarted this vision. Residents complained that the projected highways threatened to change the character of their communities by enticing commercial businesses into residential zones and giving residents fewer reasons to maintain the condition of their homes. They argued that underdeveloped land further to the west along what was then Houston's urban fringe offered a number of adequate alternative routes that would not displace settled subdivisions. Significantly, Memorial Bend residents were not anti-road as a rule, but instead were simply against the road cutting through their community. Whatever their larger position on roads, Memorial Bend residents protested the official and developer-driven growth model that had for so long determined the city's direction.

Immediately after the Outer Belt's appearance on the City of Houston's Major Thoroughfare and Freeway plan in 1952, officials began tinkering with its size and path to contend with Houston's population and territorial growth.<sup>14</sup> The route ran a total of 87.6 miles and sat six miles further out from the first ring road, Loop 610.<sup>15</sup> In its very first iteration, the road only took a 120-foot right-of-way. However, Houston officials, led by Director of City Planning Ralph Ellifrit, worried that this width would not keep up

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<sup>14</sup> Alfred Knapp, City of Houston Major Thoroughfare and Transportation Committee, "Response to Memorial Bend Movement of Highway Proposal," June 18, 1962, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>15</sup> Texas State Highway Commission Public Hearing Docket, March 6, 1969, Box 2002/101-35, Folder: Harris County, Texas State Archives (TSA).

with traffic demand as the city grew. While the initial width was being discussed, several pending housing developments along the route, including the Memorial Bend Addition, awaited platting approval. This logjam forced officials to make a decision about the right-of-way. Ellifrit insisted that the right-of-way expand to 150 feet before platting occurred. The Harris County Commissioners Court and City of Houston agreed to do so in late 1954.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1954 and 1960, real estate developers built seven subdivisions along the Outer Belt's route between Buffalo Bayou and the Katy Freeway (Interstate 10). In the space of a few years, developers converted agricultural lands and forests into homes and created street grids.<sup>17</sup> Following the “leapfrog” tendencies of developers, Memorial Bend and other subdivisions were located adjacent to undeveloped tracts of agricultural and wooded land. A 1955 Zingery fire hydrant map shows the nature of the landscape surrounding Memorial Bend during its platting.<sup>18</sup> (Figure 2.2) The rural setting around the Memorial Bend addition—vacant fields, a still-wooded bayou, and few roads—allowed developers to sell the community as a “Scenic Wooded Wonderland” where one could find “Country Living in a Metropolitan Area.”<sup>19</sup>

Promoters also sold the subdivision as luxurious, affordable, and desirable. Advertisements pointed to its award-winning architecture, its proximity to good schools,

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ralph Ellifrit to Kyle Chapman, September 21, 1954, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>17</sup> In 1954 the majority of the county was still classified as agricultural land, United State Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture: Texas 1954, <http://agcensus.mannlib.cornell.edu/AgCensus/homepage.do>, last accessed November 18, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Zingery Map Company, Hydrant Map, 1955, HMRC.

<sup>19</sup> Memorial Bend Advertisement, *Houston Chronicle*, November 11, 1957, HMRC. For a discussion of urbanization's impact on Houston's forest and tree cover see Diane C. Bates, “Urban Sprawl and the Piney Woods: Deforestation in the San Jacinto Watershed,” in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 173-184.



trappings of a modern subdivision. Despite these selling points, developers recognized that they would have little success if they could not convince potential buyers that their homes would remain connected to the city through area roadways. For this reason developers prominently remarked on the community's connections to Houston via the Katy Highway and Memorial Drive. Almost every advertisement listed the driving time to downtown Houston or to other prominent amenities. These existing roadways allowed the Memorial Bend Development Company to sell the fact that the community offered residents enough distance to escape Houston's problems, yet kept the city close enough to access its resources and employment opportunities. Allusions to the development of the Outer Loop, however, remained absent in advertisements because developers, operating under the earlier right-of-way decision, did not expect more than a thoroughfare to come through the area.

Developers of Memorial Bend and nearby subdivisions aimed to attract middle- to upper-class white Houstonians and white-collar migrants as buyers. Between 1954 and 1960, Robert Puig, the developer of Memorial Bend, succeeded in bringing dozens of such families to his development. By mid-1955, forty-eight of 202 planned homes had been built and sold, with another fifty under construction. The Gregorys, a white, middle-class couple, bought the first home. Appropriately for Houston, both Mr. and Mrs. Gregory worked at energy companies downtown, driving about a half hour each way.<sup>22</sup> The census tract that Memorial Bend was within demonstrated the success Puig and other developers had in recruiting their target buyers. In 1960 the tract was 99.3 percent white and 87 percent of the households made more than \$8,000 a year, the equivalent of a little more than \$62,000 in 2013.<sup>23</sup> Promoters trumpeted the fact that most residents were

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<sup>22</sup> "Memorial Bend Builders Push Big Program," *Houston Chronicle*, September 25, 1955, HMRC.

<sup>23</sup> Income and racial statistics taken from Social Explorer records for Houston Census Tract 91 in 1950 and 1960. See [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed October 24, 2013.

people of “high standing,” with “engineers, lawyers,” and architects buying homes. Such neighbors promised higher home values and offered the chance to raise one’s children among “good associates.” These statements gave the implicit promise of a racially exclusive neighborhood. Houston’s long history of racially homogeneous settlement patterns, discriminatory lending practices that benefitted whites over other racial groups, and high-priced homes helped make this insinuation a reality.<sup>24</sup>

When Puig and the Memorial Bend Development Company filed their subdivision plan with Harris County in December 1954, they made room for the Outer Belt’s 150-foot right-of-way. The open strip of land split the J-curved subdivision in two, bisecting Butterfly and Tosca Lanes, before meeting Memorial Drive at its northern end. (Figure 2.3) While 150 feet represented the typical highway right-of-way at that time, developers nonetheless left extra room on both sides by restricting structures from an additional 20 feet on lots that bordered the road’s path.<sup>25</sup> Given this buffer and the

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<sup>24</sup> On lending practices by the FHA, see David P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Houstonians who lived in Memorial Bend included architects and developers, such as prominent architect Bill Caudill and Memorial Bend Developer Howard Edmunds, future Houston Texans owner Robert McNair, and other business owners and professionals. For a larger list see <http://memorialbendarchitecture.com/notable.htm>, last accessed December 3, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> See 1954 plat map of Memorial Bend Subdivision, Box 4, MSS 118, Houston Subdivision Collection, HMRC.

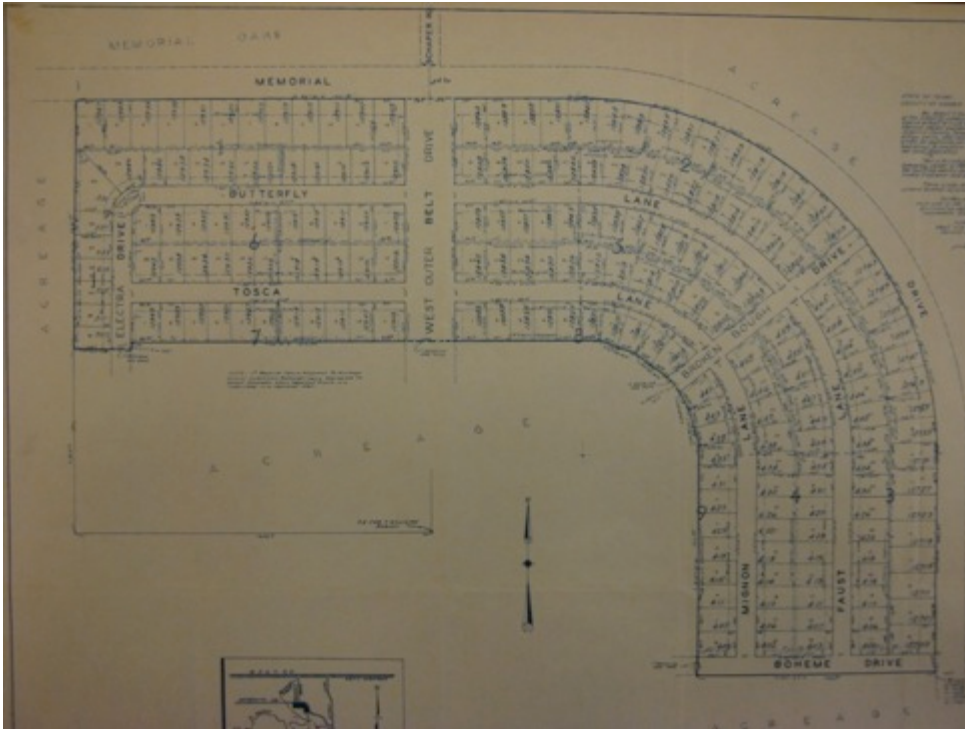


Figure 2.3: 1954 Memorial Bend Subdivision Map

The original 1954 platting map for Memorial Bend shows the Outer Belt as the wide road running bottom to top. Its right-of-way is listed at 150 feet. Each of the homes on the sides have an additional twenty feet built in case the right-of-way expanded. Box 4, MSS 118, Houston Subdivision Collection, HMRC.

established 150-foot right-of-way, the Houstonians who bought homes in the subdivision over the next five years felt secure in their purchases. Like the developers themselves, they anticipated that at most a divided four-lane highway with a grassy median would replace the existing two-lane road. Even in this scenario, though, residents believed that the platting of their subdivision set the right-of-way in stone. However, neither city nor county leaders had formally approved the final building lines for the Outer Belt, leaving routing decisions unsettled.<sup>26</sup>

The unfinished road plans allowed officials to declare in 1960 that the Outer Belt required another 150 feet of right-of-way to accommodate future traffic. Such an

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<sup>26</sup> Memo from Milton McGinty to the Houston Planning Commission, May 1962, Box 3, Folder 3, VPC, HMRC.



adjustment meant the claiming of nearly thirty developed lots in Memorial Bend. Residential and commercial developers who had not yet built their projects in west Houston strongly supported the push to widen the Outer Belt. Led by Roy Hofheinz, these developers argued that taking a wider right-of-way before construction made economic sense for the city. They also recognized that altering the right-of-way would open the door to other alterations and aimed to influence the routing of the road to serve their interests. Residents of Memorial Bend, however, responded to the news with outrage and fear. Between 1960 and 1963, homeowners like Robert McNair and H.P. Powell, both respected white businessmen, peppered the Houston City Council with complaints. The choice that officials made during the ensuing conflict reflected the city's growth priorities in the early 1960s.

In March 1960, Hofheinz and his employee Fernando Williams came before the Houston Planning Commission to ask that the body widen the Outer Belt's right-of-way. Representing his business partner R.E. Smith, Hofheinz stood before the commission as the prototypical Houston developer—wealthy, male, white, and politically connected. The two men owned thousands of acres throughout the Houston metropolitan area, with numerous tracts in west Houston.<sup>27</sup> When Hofheinz and his employee Fernando Williams—a man who worked for the planning department for nearly a decade before joining Hofheinz in the private sector—addressed the commission, like many other developers they held a number of advantages that typical Houstonians, including Memorial Bend homeowners, did not. They knew the commissioners personally. They understood the complicated process of city planning and how to navigate the different

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<sup>27</sup> The dealings of Smith and Hofheinz were common features in Houston newspapers during the 1950s and 1960s. "Smith Tract Sold for \$6 Million" *Houston Post*, July 23, 1964, Box 33, Folder 11, George Fuermann Collection (GFC), Special Collections Library University of Houston (SCLUH). The men also jointly developed the Astrodome area in the early 1960s.

levels of government involved. And, finally, they recognized the vital importance of connecting residential and commercial developments to highways.

In their proposal to widen the Outer Belt, Hofheinz and Williams recounted the mistakes the city made during the right-of-way acquisitions that occurred during Hofheinz's time as mayor. While buying land for the first loop project, the city encountered "delay and expense that resulted from increasing the standards for the development of the North Loop and consequent renegotiation with the same owners for wider and wider right-of-way." To avoid repeating this problem, Hofheinz urged the commission to preemptively widen the right-of-way and to buy all the required land before construction started. Expanding the road plans to 300 feet, Hofheinz reminded the commission, would also make it wide enough for the Texas Highway Department to add the road to the formal state highway system in the future, saving local governments millions in maintenance costs that the state would take on.<sup>28</sup>

The questions members of the planning commission put to Hofheinz reflected the central role developers played in Houston's growth politics. When asked if he was concerned about the right-of-way because of his own real estate interests in west Houston, Hofheinz responded that far from an attempt to secure a financial windfall for himself, his presence at the meeting and interest in the widening project were motivated by civic concerns. He insisted that he did not own right-of-way that he intended to sell along the route. He did, though, have land he would willingly donate for the road to the county or city if officials created tax deductions for such gifts. One can infer that Hofheinz' hope that running the road near his property would raise its value gave rise to his willingness to facilitate its construction.<sup>29</sup> The Houston Planning Commission

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<sup>28</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, March 15, 1960, Box 2, Folder 3, VPC, HMRC.

<sup>29</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, March 15, 1960, Box 2, Folder 3, VPC, HMRC.

approved the widening just after the Harris County Commissioners Court, which Hofheinz also lobbied, voted the same way in December 1960.<sup>30</sup>

Over the next several years, residents of Memorial Bend challenged the validity of the change and developers continued to back it. The fight pitted two sets of property rights against one another. Given that land ownership was nearly sacrosanct in Texas, the fact that homes were being taken, especially the homes of white suburbanites was quite problematic. However, as with the homes of African Americans and other Houstonians downtown, the claiming of property was justified by promises of greater total growth. This selling point justified many of the choices Houston officials made in the 1950s and 1960s. Most visible in the building of infrastructure, this line of reasoning also appeared in the construction of the Astrodome, the expansion of the Medical Center, and the embrace of suburbanization. Houstonians whose homes were not affected by these or other projects bought this justification, leaving those who experienced displacement or discomfort out in the cold. Furthermore, in the Memorial Bend case, the influence of the developers led to their property rights being treated with greater weight. Land ownership remained sacred, but only political influence kept it that way.

Testifying before the planning commission, Memorial Bend residents Robert McNair and H.P. Powell argued that altering the right-of-way after the original platting represented an egregious violation of their property rights.<sup>31</sup> By the time they appeared in front of the commission, however, the county had already begun protective buying—purchasing several homes along the right-of-way in Memorial Bend and slotting them for demolition. Undeterred, residents accelerated their campaign against the road. McNair and others organized the petition against the road and urged immediate action by their

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<sup>30</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, December 20, 1960, Box 2, Folder 3, VPC, HMRC.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from H.P. Powell to M.A. Walker, May 15, 1962, CHPD, ESRC; Houston Planning Commission Minutes, June 5, 1962, Box 2, Folder 5, VPC, HMRC.

neighbors to “stop this foolishness.” Many residents believed that the road negated the very reasons they purchased their homes in Memorial Bend—the promise of growing property values and country-like seclusion. Anti-Outer Belt residents also argued that a wider highway would lead to diesel trucks flying through the subdivision at all hours of the night and change the nature of the community by encouraging a shift from residential to commercial development.<sup>32</sup> When residents presented the petition to the planning commission in 1962 they called for the entire Outer Belt to be moved several miles west, beyond the reach of current residential development.<sup>33</sup>

In his initial response to resident complaints, Director of Planning Ellifrit attempted to calm nerves by explaining that the construction of the road would not be immediate, but rather done in stages spread over several years. On the subject of moving the highway to the west, Ellifrit pointed out that a shift of one branch of the ring road would require the re-routing of the entire circuit, likely making the suggestion untenable. The chair of the Houston Planning Commission, Milton McGinty, also weighed in to ease worries about creeping commercialization and the physical toll the road would take on Memorial Bend. McGinty argued that leaving the road in its current state would exacerbate, not prevent, detrimental development because cars and trucks would use the route more as the city expanded. Wary of seeing plans derailed or delayed, officials attempted to calm the fears of residents by agreeing to study the proposed reroute.<sup>34</sup> Even if the study was an appeasement, it represented an unprecedented acquiescence to citizen demands.

City and county officials conducted the reroute study and presented their findings to the planning commission two weeks after the initial request. They concluded that while

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<sup>32</sup> “Attention Homeowners and Taxpayers!!” Memorial Bend Protest Flyer, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>33</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, June 5, 1962, Box 2, Folder 5, VPC, HMRC.

<sup>34</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, June 5, 1962, Box 2, Folder 5, VPC, HMRC.

a functional substitute route existed to the west along Dairy-Ashford Road, the current alignment remained preferable because of its significantly lower costs and connection to other roads. The reroute would push the Outer Belt 2.75 miles further west and require nearly two times the number of grade separations. Further, estimates projected that while the new route would save approximately \$900,000 in right-of-way costs, it would increase overall costs by \$4.5 million. This cost ended discussion of the adjusted route. While they ultimately rejected residents' requests, officials did attempt to appease some concerns by agreeing not to buy properties in the expanded right-of-way until construction was imminent. Additionally, they agreed to rent out already purchased properties, rather than demolish them. Although residents were disappointed in the overall outcome, they saw these two concessions as important to maintaining a semblance of normal life until construction began.<sup>35</sup>

That residents of Memorial Bend could not alter the highway plans despite their relative social and political power demonstrated that transportation decision-making was not simply a process of catering to interests of suburban whites. Indeed, the Houston Planning Commission and Harris County Commissioners Court likely responded to the request to consider a reroute because those making it were wealthy, white homeowners in the path of a road that officials projected would be built twenty years in the future. But even this group could not stop the project. The complaints of Memorial Bend residents proved that not all white suburbanites wholeheartedly supported highways. The ultimate decision showed that the effects of road construction were not restricted to the central city. For all the concessions they gained, white suburbanites along the Outer Belt witnessed the disruptive nature of infrastructure planning and in the future would have a major highway run through their subdivision.

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<sup>35</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, June 19, 1962, Box 2, Folder 5, VPC, HMRC.

After helping to usher through the wider right-of-way, Roy Hofheinz and Fernando Williams continued to lobby the Houston Planning Commission. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the developers worked to secure several realignments and adjustments to the Outer Loop. While smaller in scale and cost than the wholesale reroute proposed by Memorial Bend residents, Hofheinz and Williams's requests for changes were not inconsequential. Their success in securing the alterations demonstrated the influence that developers held in Houston's transportation decision-making.

The majority of the property Hofheinz and Smith owned in West Houston lay at or just to the north of the planned intersection of the Outer Belt and State Highway 59. As route plans were solidifying in the late 1950s, the developers asked the planning commission to tweak the route to accommodate their developments. Fernando Williams wrote to the commission in December 1958 and suggested a number of changes that would keep Smith and Hofheinz' land as contiguous, and therefore as developable, as possible.<sup>36</sup> In one proposed alteration, near the intersection of Beechnut Street and the Outer Loop, the developers asked that the road follow a straight trajectory rather than curve. This change, Williams argued, would allow a number of developments blocked by the current alignment to go forward.<sup>37</sup> With another request, the developers sought to move the Outer Belt at Richmond Avenue 400 feet further west to create more than 200 feet of developable property. In his letter Williams made it clear that he had also contacted county officials who "had no objections to the revisions as long as they are

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<sup>36</sup> The fact that the aim of their visit to the Houston Planning Commission was to gain more land for Smith and Hofheinz was not hidden. Williams expressly stated that he was addressing a number of concerns the two developers had about the route and then listed the particular changes they wanted to see. Letter from Fernando Williams and Roy Hofheinz to Houston Planning Commission, December 22, 1958, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

requested by the Houston City Planning Commission.”<sup>38</sup> Both government bodies implemented the requests.

The 1958 reroute request was just one of several that developers like Hofheinz, Smith, and Williams made for the route of the Outer Belt. In 1963, Williams returned to secure a smaller reroute. The request focused on the Outer Belt from Beechnut Street to Bellfort Drive. The developers sought a new alignment for this 2.1-mile section of road that would add 1200 feet to the route. They wanted the Outer Loop to follow an existing road instead of cutting through unimproved land they owned. They argued that building atop an established road would lower construction and right-of-way costs. As with earlier suggestions, Williams made it explicitly clear that the change would leave more developable land on their properties. In the case of this realignment, the new route would “cross their property at a more desirable angle,” keeping the property connected and viable for development.<sup>39</sup>

As Hofheinz had shown during the Outer Belt widening debate, developers and landowners often affected the outcome of planning decisions by donating property along road routes to guarantee that highways would follow paths that met their interests. Such actions negated the costs associated with realignment and made officials much more amenable to plan changes. In the case of the Bellfort Road request, city and county officials approved the shift after Hofheinz and Smith donated land that made it possible to alter the alignment at no extra cost.<sup>40</sup>

While the requests made by Williams, Hofheinz, and other developers in the early 1960s did not ask officials to move entire highways, they nonetheless represented significant changes to proposed routes. Other west Houston stakeholders did not have the

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Williams and Hofheinz to Houston Planning Commission, December 22, 1958.

<sup>39</sup> Houston Planning Commission Minutes, February 6, 1963, Box 2, Folder 6, VPC, HMRC.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

ability to sweeten their requests with donated land, nor did their properties hold the same potential for increased tax revenues that undeveloped land did.<sup>41</sup> The extended timeline of the Outer Belt's construction and the relatively undeveloped nature of the landscape through which it ran made the road a uniquely negotiable project, but officials only truly negotiated with developers.

The Outer Belt projects captured the contentious nature of infrastructure development, even on the still developing edges of the city. Officials justified rejecting citizen complaints by asserting that they did not want to establish damaging precedents. Ralph Ellifrit maintained that if the city gave in to unhappy residents even once, it would complicate long-range planning, stymie suburban growth, and open the floodgates to future challenges.<sup>42</sup> At a time when Houston officials prioritized economic and territorial expansion, embracing such a risk was far too dangerous.

Given the amount of opposition and negotiation attached to the planning of a future roadway, one might expect that the two major interstates coming through downtown Houston would have fostered even greater debate. As the next section will show, however, officials approached these projects in a much different manner than the Outer Belt and the residents most affected by the roadways did not organize against the routes until it was too late to block construction.

## **THE INTERSTATES AND THE WARDS**

Most Houstonians shared a sense that roads and personal cars enabled access to broader forms of freedom. The meaning and definition of that freedom, though, was

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<sup>41</sup> Owen Gutfreund discusses the power that such donations gave developers in several case studies in *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 107. The relationship between the development of Sharpstown and state highway 59 also was shaped by land donations of landowners, see "Spiller Enlarges Offer of SW Freeway Right-of-Way" *Houston Post* September 6, 1957, H-Freeways-1950s Vertical File (VF), HMRC; "Freeway Give-Away," November 1957, *Houston*, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC.

<sup>42</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, January 27, 1965, HMRC.



where black and white Houstonians most diverged in their thinking about highways. For many black Houstonians, embroiled in campaigns against segregation in public spaces and on public transportation and well aware of similar drives across the nation, personal automobiles represented a chance to escape the discrimination and stress attached to a daily commute on public transit. Likewise, the ease of movement that automobiles afforded all drivers gave African American motorists a freedom of choice and control not available on other modes of transportation or on city streets where segregation laws governed their seat or step.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, the physical consequences wrought by the imposition of highways onto black neighborhoods stood in tension with this freedom. During the city's booming 1950s, parts of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards still lacked adequate paving and drainage, suffered through service outages, and received little public support for improvements to parks, schools or hospitals. (Figure 2.4) The interstates came directly through the Third and Fifth Wards, causing hundreds of residential and commercial displacements and

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<sup>43</sup> On treatment and discrimination of blacks on public transportation and African American responses see, Robin D. G. Kelley, "Congested Terrain," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 55-75; Blair Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010). On contemporary transportation oriented protests see Robert J. Walker, *Let My People Go!: The Miracle of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Lanham, Md.: Hamilton Books, 2007); Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Christina Melton, *Signpost to Freedom: The 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott* (Louisiana Public Broadcasting, 2004), film; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 204-5. Houston had a brief street boycott by black residents in 1903 when the original segregation laws for public transit were passed, William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 12. On the importance of cars to Houston African American man Eldrewey Stearns, see Thomas R. Cole, *No Color Is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 14-15, 146, 152. On the freedom automobility provided to African Americans, Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 105-128; Kathleen Franz, "'The Open Road': Automobility and Racial Uplift in the Interwar Years," in *Technology and the African-American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, ed. Bruce Sinclair (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Mark S. Foster, "In the Face of 'Jim Crow': Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945," *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 2 (1999): 130-149; Paul Gilroy, "Driving While Black," in Daniel Miller, ed., *Car Cultures, Materializing Culture* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2001), 81-104.

wholesale turnover of neighborhood land uses. The physical transformation of neighborhoods caused significant shifts in the ways residents conceptualized and moved through their communities. As they considered their stance toward the city's highways, African Americans had no unified response.



Figure 2.4: Fifth Ward Street, 1961

This image shows the conditions of many of Houston's African Americans communities. African Americans hoped that development might lead to improvements, but instead such physical issues allowed city and highway officials to justify building roads through these areas. Owen Johnson photographer, *Houston Post*, December 4, 1961, Houston Post Collection, RGD0006, 284, HMRC.

By the late 1960s an accrual of negative consequences led many of those residents who lived in areas directly affected by the presence of highways to vocalize their discontent and to place transportation issues at the center of a broader push for civil rights.

A number of factors combined to shape the possibility of African American resistance to the interstates. Chief among them was the fact that the political and

economic limitations they faced made any fight of that sort an uphill battle.<sup>44</sup> During the late 1950s and early 1960s, black Houstonians still could not count on influencing the Houston City Council or Harris County officials. The roads ran through neighborhoods that were overwhelmingly black and with residents, on average, who had significantly lower income levels than residents in the predominantly white areas of the city. In 1960, the Third Ward was 98.7 percent black and only 2.8 percent of households matched the \$8000 (\$62,000 in 2013) annual income held by 87 percent of Memorial Bend residents. The Fifth Ward was 98.4 percent black and only 2.4 percent of its households matched or surpassed that income level.<sup>45</sup> In addition, most residents were renters with little legal power to contest eminent domain takings.<sup>46</sup> Limited economic means and a politically marginalized population gave elected officials little reason to cater to the concerns of residents in these areas. In addition, the Houston NAACP chapter, historically one of the city's most powerful civil rights entities, experienced a lull in membership in the early 1960s that reduced the likelihood of citywide organization against the roadways. Further, the civil rights momentum that did exist in the early 1960s centered mainly on voting rights, integration, and labor rights, not large-scale infrastructure issues. Finally, the disruptive nature of the highway projects made organizing against them very difficult. The projects planning and construction occurred quickly and when highways bisected

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<sup>44</sup> Even the wealthiest and most influential of Houston's African American and ethnic Mexican populations possessed significantly less political power than whites of their equivalent class or social position for most of the twentieth century. For a discussion of some exceptions to this pattern and examples of ethnic Mexican and African American Houstonians who possessed significant social influence in the city as a whole, especially Felix Tijerina and Hobart Taylor see, Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 108-114; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 246-248.

<sup>45</sup> Income and racial statistics taken from Social Explorer records for Houston Census Tract 37 and 18 in 1960, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed October 24, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> In 1960, 90 percent of Third Ward homes in Houston Census Tract 34 were rented. 75 percent of Fifth Ward homes in Houston Census Tract 18 were as well. Social Explorer, 1960, Houston Census Tract 18 and 34, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed October 24, 2013.

neighborhoods they dispersed residents throughout the city, breaking community networks that might have helped organize resistance.<sup>47</sup>

Understanding the state of black civil rights groups in Houston at the moment of highway construction is also important to understanding why resistance to the roadways did not become a priority until the mid-to-late 1960s. The Houston branch of the NAACP reached its apex in the early 1950s, after having built one of the nation's largest chapters on the basis of its leadership in several important legal cases, such as *Smith v. Allwright*, in which the Supreme Court outlawed the all-white primary election in 1944, and *Sweatt v. Painter*, in which the Supreme Court compelled the integration of the University of Texas at Austin Law School, in 1950.<sup>48</sup> The NAACP and other groups helped raise the number of black voters in Texas after the decision. In the early 1950s, when chapters in other southern cities were declining in the face of violence, the Houston branch remained strong under the leadership of Lulu B. White.<sup>49</sup> At its postwar peak in the early 1950s, the Houston branch listed 10,000 members and in 1957 the rolls still held the names of over 3,000 members.<sup>50</sup> These totals represented a much higher number than those in other

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<sup>47</sup> Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> On *Smith v. Allwright*, Carter Wesley, executive secretary of the Houston Branch in 1940, played a central role in choosing the plaintiffs and helping shape the NAACP's legal strategy for the case. For documents related to the case, especially correspondence between Wesley and Thurgood Marshall, see the microfilmed papers of the NAACP 1940-55, Legal file, Part 18, Series A, Reel 9 (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1993). On *Sweatt v. Painter*, Lulu B. White played a leading role in selecting and mentoring Heman Sweatt through the trial, see Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Gary Lavergne, *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road To Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> For a longer discussion of the 1950s violence directed at the NAACP in the southern United States see Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of The Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2009), 425. Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow*.

<sup>50</sup> Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow*, 107, 120-128; "A Fading Symbol," *Forward Times*, January 12, 1963, HMRC; See also, Letter from Gloster Current to Earl Boone, November 20, 1962, microfilmed papers of the NAACP Selected Branch Files, 1956-1965, Part 27, Series A, Reel 15 (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1999.)

southern states and cities.<sup>51</sup> After White died in 1957, internal squabbles, a state injunction against the group, perceived political inaction, and competition from other civil rights groups lowered the group's membership. By 1962 just 600 members remained.<sup>52</sup> The decline of the NAACP branch did not mean an end to black political activism in the city as new groups such as the Progressive Youth Association, which led Houston's student sit-in movement in March 1960, emerged in its stead.<sup>53</sup> The growth of these groups signaled a generational shift in black activism, as younger African Americans moved away from the legal strategies of the NAACP and towards direct action and protest. While such new groups demonstrated that energy for activism remained in the city, the weakening of the NAACP, one of the few citywide civil rights organizations, did significantly lower the chance that cooperative resistance from the Third and Fifth Ward could be organized to stop the interstates.<sup>54</sup>

The first interstate section that threatened downtown black communities was the Pierce Elevated, a six-lane elevated freeway through downtown and part of the Third Ward, for which officials inaugurated a regimen of protective buying and condemnation in 1957.<sup>55</sup> Plans called for the project to claim half a block of property along a mile-and-a-quarter stretch of Pierce Avenue and cost a total of \$8 million, the equivalent of more than \$65 million in 2013. Ninety percent of that total came from the federal government

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<sup>51</sup> For example, in 1951 the entire state of Mississippi had a total of 1303 members down from 3540 in 1948. Likewise the Memphis branch had only 731 members in 1952. Mississippi figures from Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 400. Memphis figures from Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 190.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Current to Boone, November 20, 1962; Ramona Houston, "The NAACP State Conference in Texas: Intermediary and Catalyst for Change, 1937-1957," *Journal of African American History* 94 (4) (Fall 2009): 509-528.

<sup>53</sup> Cole, *No Color is My Kind*, 13-80.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the Houston NAACP Branch's formation and decline, as well as a description of the civil rights atmosphere in Houston in the 1960s see Bullard, *Invisible Houston*, 120-124; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 141-185, 286-287.

<sup>55</sup> "Big Highways Program In Harris Gets Go Ahead," July 17, 1957, *Houston Post*, H-Freeways-1950 VF, HMRC.

through the Interstate Act. A.C. Kyser, the engineer manager for Houston freeway projects, believed that the route would prevent a traffic crisis downtown.<sup>56</sup> Just as opinions on the Outer Belt depended upon one's connection to the space through which it ran, Houstonians who lived and worked along the proposed route of the Pierce Elevated possessed divergent thoughts on the project.

For many white Houstonians, the building of the Pierce Elevated offered the opportunity to remove the eyesore of dilapidated housing and undesirable businesses in the northwest corner of the Third Ward. A 1958 article in the *Houston Post* urged the city to take advantage of the redevelopment opportunities created by highway building. The article, like many before it, embraced the new roads. It contended that Houstonians should celebrate the city's march "into the prairie about it," through its growing network of highways. Elements of the system, "the multi-million dollar expanses of the Gulf Freeway, Eastex Freeway, or Hardy Street Bridge," were modern marvels of engineering that reflected Houston's growing significance and the great capabilities of its citizens. Yet, as drivers cruised along these new routes they were confronted by "the relentless spread of slums," just beyond the business district.<sup>57</sup>

The idea of using highways as a spur for redevelopment and to remove undesirable populations or structures from the downtown area was not unique to Houston. In many American cities, the construction of roadways occurred simultaneously with other urban renewal projects such as public housing. Despite being depicted as positive, these contemporaneous strategies most often resulted in the creation of "second ghettos," as African Americans and other impoverished residents were displaced into

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<sup>56</sup> "Plan for New Gulf Freeway Feeder Offered," October 20, 1956, *Houston Chronicle*, H-Freeways-Gulf Freeway VF, HMRC.

<sup>57</sup> "Core: City's Heart Needs Treatment." From "Houston, 1958" Supplement to *Houston Post*, January 16, 1958, Box 3, Folder 5, VPC, HMRC.

increasingly segregated and under-supported pockets of the city. In Houston, little support for public housing and the rejection of federal funds for urban renewal led to an uneven process of displacement and resettling, but areas of concentrated poverty were created nonetheless. The construction of highways contributed to this by displacing residents, many of who resettled into already dense parts of the Third and Fifth Wards and overtaxed their services and resources. The highways also blocked off those neighborhoods with new boundaries, physically defining the de facto second ghettos.<sup>58</sup>

As the route of the Pierce Elevated ran away from the Third Ward toward the heart of downtown Houston the highway threatened more than homes of African Americans and the small businesses they patronized. Closer to the center of the city the road necessitated the claiming of properties owned by several prominent white businessmen and corporations. The leaders of these companies were among the first to question the merits of the road. The politics involved with their dissent once again magnified the differences between elite and non-elite citizen complaints and reconfirmed the difficulty of changing road plans. While none of the corporate leaders who protested were from the topmost echelons of the Houston elite, their economic and political power was certainly not trivial. In the late 1950s, Oscar Weyrich, the president of Houston Bank and Trust Company, waged a campaign to stop the construction of the elevated section of the road because it threatened his bank's expansion plans. Joined by other landowners on the western edge of the route, Weyrich sued the state and city for illegal takings. In 1957, it appeared that the landowners might win as the City Council contemplated removing the

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<sup>58</sup> For further discussion of the conscious use of roadways by city and state officials as a form of urban renewal see Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*, 95-111; Martin Anderson, *Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949-1962* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); Bernard Friedan and Lynne Sagalyn, *Downtown Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). For "second ghetto" description and discussion see Hirsch, *Making of the Second Ghetto*. Houston's history with public housing is document in Bullard, *Invisible Houston*, 41-49.

building lines and rerouting the road. But, as they had with the Memorial Bend decision, officials ultimately decided that removing established plans because of an upset minority would set a poor precedent. Instead, they compromised with the majority of the landowning businessmen and agreed to pay higher prices for key plots of land.<sup>59</sup>

Weyrich continued to resist the plan, laying out the consequences he believed would occur in a 1959 letter to Texas Highway Department Engineer A.C. Kyser. Weyrich argued that the road meant “the abandonment of plans for office buildings, stores and similar improvements,” along Pierce that would have produced tax revenue for the city. Further, he predicted that the displacement caused by the road would not be limited to properties within the right-of-way, but instead that its influence would ripple outward. The road would act as “a Chinese Wall to normal development” and would cause blight for several blocks both north and south of the freeway. Weyrich criticized the highway department for lack of transparency and asked why no public meetings had been held to determine the routing or form the road would take.<sup>60</sup>

Kyser responded directly to Weyrich with several justifications for the route. Kyser argued that growing downtown congestion necessitated a limited-access, interstate-standard roadway. The Texas Highway Department estimated that the new road would increase traffic capacity to 75,000 vehicles a day. Kyser also pointed out that the section was essential to the success of the entire highway system as it represented the only link between the roads that, at that point, ended on either side of downtown. As far as the blight concerns, Kyser assured Weyrich that the Pierce Elevated would not cause the same problems elevated roadways in other cities had because it was an “open-type

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<sup>59</sup> “Tracts Bought For Elevated Roadway Here” *Houston Chronicle*, January 15, 1958, H-Freeways Gulf Freeway VF, HMRC; “City May Knock Out Pierce Freeway line” *Houston Chronicle*, April 18, 1957, H-Freeways Gulf Freeway VF, HMRC.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Oscar Weyrich to AC Kyser, October 20, 1959, Weyrich Letters, Box 2002/101-72, Texas Highway Department Historical Records (THDHR), TSA.



construction with modern, pleasing, architectural lines.” Far from hurting the community, the road would promote commerce by removing freeway traffic from local streets and creating a pleasing visual form. In the end, Kyser thanked Weyrich for his input, but asserted that the road plan remained the same.<sup>61</sup>



Figure 2.5 and 2.6: Pierce Elevated

Two views of the Pierce Elevated under construction through downtown Houston. The left photo shows the end of the Pierce just after opening, but before the interchange with US 59 was constructed. Note the cleared lots on the right side of the picture in the northern Third Ward. On the right side is a view of the road through downtown. Texas Department of Transportation, Communications Division, Media Production, Photo Library. Left Photo by F.W. Brown, August 30, 1967. Right Photo by Jack Lewis, December 3, 1964.

Unlike the patience they showed with Weyrich’s complaints, when officials began work on the interstate projects near downtown and in the Third and Fifth Wards they showed little concern for potential political fallout and moved quickly to purchase and build the roads.<sup>62</sup> As interstate plans took shape and right-of-way clearance began for I-45, the physical consequences of construction—displacements and the reshaping of the

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<sup>61</sup> Letter from A.C. Kyser to Oscar Weyrich, October 22, 1959, Weyrich Letters, Box 2002/101-72, THDHR, TSA.

<sup>62</sup> “City Seeks Elevated Freeway, *Houston Post*, July 22, 1960, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC.

neighborhood—became apparent in the Third Ward. Texas Highway Department photographs and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps capture the stark physical changes made by I-45 as it cut through the ward. The Texas Highway Department photographs show the clearing that occurred downtown and in the northern Third Ward. (Figures 2.5 and 2.6) The Sanborn maps likewise demonstrate this transition. The 1951 maps of the Third Ward showed dozens of homes and businesses on the 1900 block between Pierce and Calhoun Avenues. On the 1970 maps they no longer exist. In their place is a set of lines that represents I-45.<sup>63</sup> These maps provide a bird's eye view of how the neighborhood changed after the interstate. The road subsumed an entire block and turned Pierce and Calhoun Avenues into feeder and frontage roads. The highway also eliminated two cross streets in the Third Ward. With the building of the road entire parts of the Third Ward disappeared and the absences forced residents to redefine their daily lives and movements.<sup>64</sup> (Figures 2.7 and 2.8)

As Weyrich predicted, the consequences of construction were not limited to the immediate vicinity of the road. Instead, the effects of the highway rippled outward. The changes to Dowling Street reflect this process. In 1960, seventy-four black-owned and black-patronized businesses operated between the 1800 block and the 2300 block of Dowling Street.<sup>65</sup> The businesses on this stretch demonstrated the centrality of Dowling's involvement in the economy of the Third Ward and wider Houston: fourteen beauty salons and barber shops, eleven restaurants and cafés, five gas stations, three pharmacies, one movie theater, two African American insurance companies, seven dentist or

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<sup>63</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1951 and 1970 maps see Vol. 4, section 471, Vol. 9, Section 900. Available on Microfilm at the DBCAH.

<sup>64</sup> Jacobs, *Death and Life*. Jacobs explores the importance of smaller side streets and cross streets to neighborhood cohesion and health.

<sup>65</sup> *Polk's Houston (Harris County) City Directory* (Houston, TX: Polk, 1960), DBCAH.

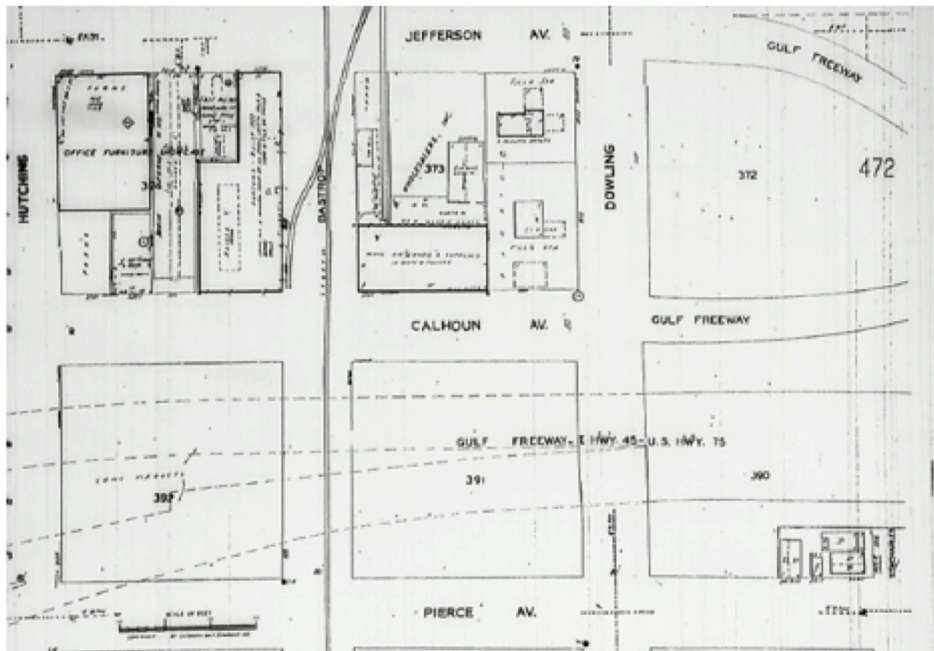
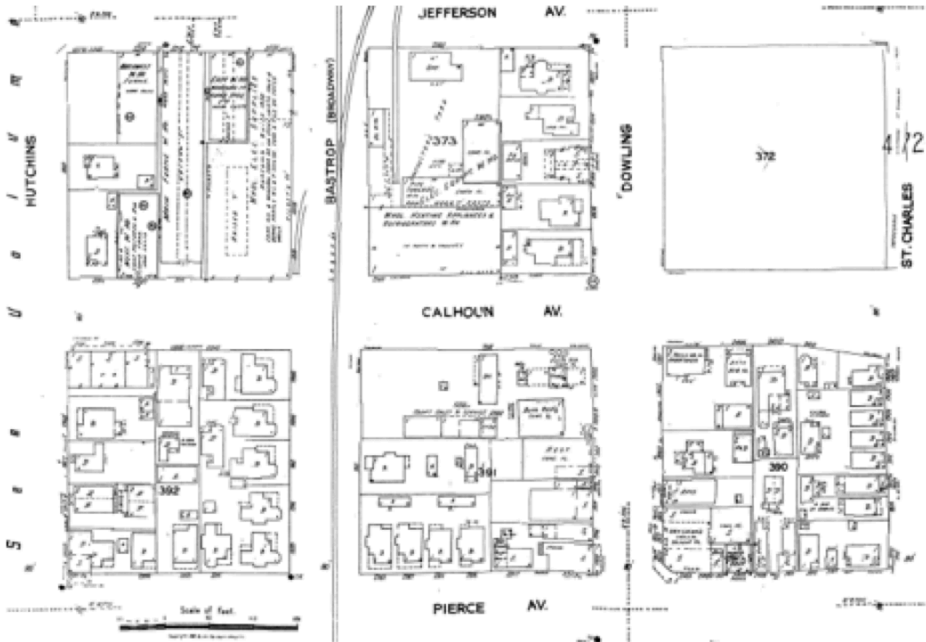


Figure 2.7 and 2.8: Third Ward Sanborn Maps

These are the same Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps from 1951 and 1970. These images depict the route of the I-45 through the Third Ward across Dowling Street. 1951 map accessed through the University of Texas's UMI Sanborn Map Database, <http://sanborn.umi.com/> last accessed November 7, 2013. 1970 map scanned from microfilm collection of HMRC.

physicians offices, the headquarters of the Houston chapter of the NAACP and the headquarters of the student-led Progressive Youth Association.<sup>66</sup> Not only did these businesses provide black patrons with a welcoming place to shop in segregated Houston, they employed a number of local residents and kept the wealth of the Third Ward within the community.<sup>67</sup> By 1964, when I-45 cut Dowling in half between the 1800 and 2000 blocks, the number of businesses along that same stretch of road dwindled to forty-nine. By 1970, the number had dropped once more, falling to only forty-two businesses.<sup>68</sup> The road's construction corresponded to a marked change in the character of the Dowling Street business district and exacerbated a decline in the economic power of the Third Ward.

The roadway hit the residential sections of the Third Ward particularly hard as well. The ward was about twice as dense as other parts of the city in 1960, ensuring that any roads that ran through it would cause disruption to a larger number of people than it would have elsewhere. Prior to the eminent domain takings for Interstate 45 and State Highway 288 the neighborhood held nearly 17,000 dwellings. By 1966, the community had only 15,000 dwellings. The twin road projects resulted in the removal of over 2,000 homes and put pressure on housing stock in other parts of the ward as they became even more densely populated.<sup>69</sup> The physical toll the roadways took on both businesses and homes does not capture the attached psychological impact they caused for ward residents. Just as the road physically reshaped the neighborhood, it also shifted residents' cognitive ideas of the neighborhood, creating an unrecognizable Third Ward.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the significance of Dowling and its businesses see Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*.

<sup>68</sup> 1964 and 1970 numbers from *Polk's Houston (Harris County) City Directory* (Houston, TX: Polk, 1960), DBCAH.

<sup>69</sup> City of Houston Planning Department, "Third Ward Data Book," Box 2, CHPD, RG A 002, HMRC, 1-6.

Ernie Attwell, a long-time Third Ward resident and city planner, recalled the physical and mental costs of the highways. When an oral history interviewer asked about the interstate's impact, Attwell responded with a question of his own. "What was on the land" in the Third Ward before the roads ran over it? Not waiting for an answer from his interviewer, he continued, "human beings, houses, businesses were on the land." The roads "about killed" the Fifth and Third Wards because displacement and its aftereffects, which Attwell estimated to have driven as many as 30,000 people away, drained the customer base of businesses. "If you own the hair style place, you have no people coming to your hair style place, right, you moved 30,000 people. You have nobody coming to your grocery store." Attwell also remembered the ripple effects of the road's presence. As the road was built and people moved away a "knock down, and abandoning of many houses and many buildings" outside of the right-of-way occurred, changing the neighborhood from vibrant, livable space into a shell of its former self.<sup>70</sup>

Residents and outside observers also found fault with the raised form of the Pierce Elevated. Critics singled out the spaces created underneath the road as problematic. To many, the looming structure widened the divide between sections of the neighborhood and created dark, seemingly useless spaces below the road. Prominent architect Patrick Horsburgh disliked the aesthetic effects elevated roadways had on cities and neighborhoods. Writing about the Pierce Elevated, Horsburgh argued that the road's demarcation of central business district boundaries aided long-term planning. But, it also created "cavernous spaces beneath the highways" that were "psychologically

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<sup>70</sup> Ernie Attwell, interview by Dorothee Sauter, September 22, 2004, transcript, Box 9, 2006-005, Houston Oral History Project (HPP), Special Collection Library University of Houston (SCLUH)

intolerable.” The “sheer un-neighborliness” and “drafty dankness” of the road was “detrimental to housing and to other domestic land uses.”<sup>71</sup>

Horsburgh’s critique highlighted the physical changes the road created in the neighborhood. Rather than productive city blocks lined by businesses and private homes, the Third Ward now possessed an elevated freeway with blocks of underutilized space beneath it. The city attempted to retrofit the empty space almost immediately. In 1968, within a year of the road’s opening, the Houston Planning Department and the Houston Municipal Art Commission released a report entitled “Beautification Study: Freeways.” It suggested that the areas underneath the road be developed into a mix of “playgrounds, plazas, and parking” and included a number of illustrations depicting children playing basketball and office workers enjoying a break beneath six lanes of traffic. The northern Third Ward’s residential character made it the perfect location “for children’s playgrounds...basketball courts, game floors, and various forms of play equipment.” (Figure 2.9) The report, however, ignored the fact that to access these play areas children would need to cross high-speed frontage roads.<sup>72</sup> While the highway department showed a willingness to work with localities on such improvements, aside from a few trails along the bayous north of downtown, the effort fell flat. By the mid-1970s nearly all the areas underneath Houston’s elevated highways held parking lots.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Patrick Horsburgh, “Blight, A Foretold Affliction,” *Texas Architect*, May 1966, Box 29, Folder 3, GFC, SCLUH, 7-8; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, new ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), makes similar arguments about the built environment in Los Angeles.

<sup>72</sup> Houston Municipal Art Commission; City of Houston Department of Planning, “Beautification Study: Freeways,” 1968, Box 5, CHPD, RG A 004, HMRC.

<sup>73</sup> State Highway Commission Minutes, August 5, 1971, Minute Order #65169, Box 1998/69-06 (May 1970-May 1971), THDHR, TSA, 44.



Figure 2.9: Under Pierce Elevated  
Artist's rendition of recreational possibilities below the Pierce Elevated along the Third Ward. Houston Municipal Art Commission City of Houston Department of Planning, "Beautification Study: Freeways," 1968, Box 5, City of Houston Planning Department Collection, RG A 004, HMRC.

Newspaper accounts of the opening of the Pierce Elevated in August of 1967 avoided any mention of the controversial and disruptive nature of the project. The *Houston Chronicle* applauded the opening of the road and anticipated a significant easing of congestion downtown as through-drivers could now avoid the "tortuous 23 blocks of street level traffic" they faced prior to the highway.<sup>74</sup> Echoing the earlier *Houston Post* article that touted the roads and sought a modern downtown to match them, columnists celebrated the fact that drivers no longer saw slums and battered buildings as they drove the Pierce Elevated. Instead the road lifted drivers up and provided a "scenic...magnificent view of the business district...almost like going up in a cable car."<sup>75</sup> Such celebratory accounts of the Pierce Elevated made it easier for the

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<sup>74</sup> "Gulf Freeway Through Town Expected by September 1," *Houston Post*, June 25, 1967, H-Freeways Gulf Freeway VF, HMRC.

<sup>75</sup> "A New, Beautiful Freeway Link," *Houston Chronicle*, August 22, 1967, H-Freeways-1950s VF, HMRC. \_

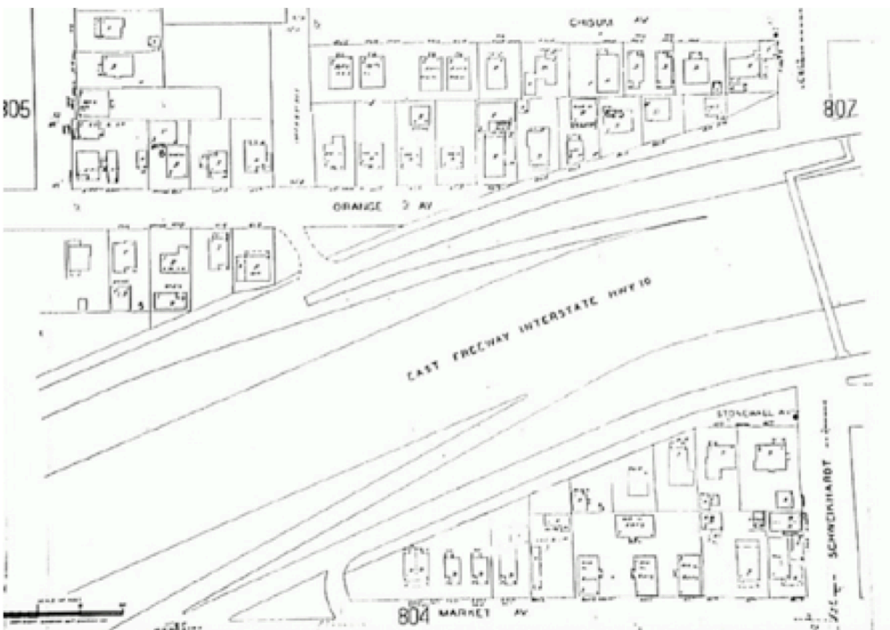
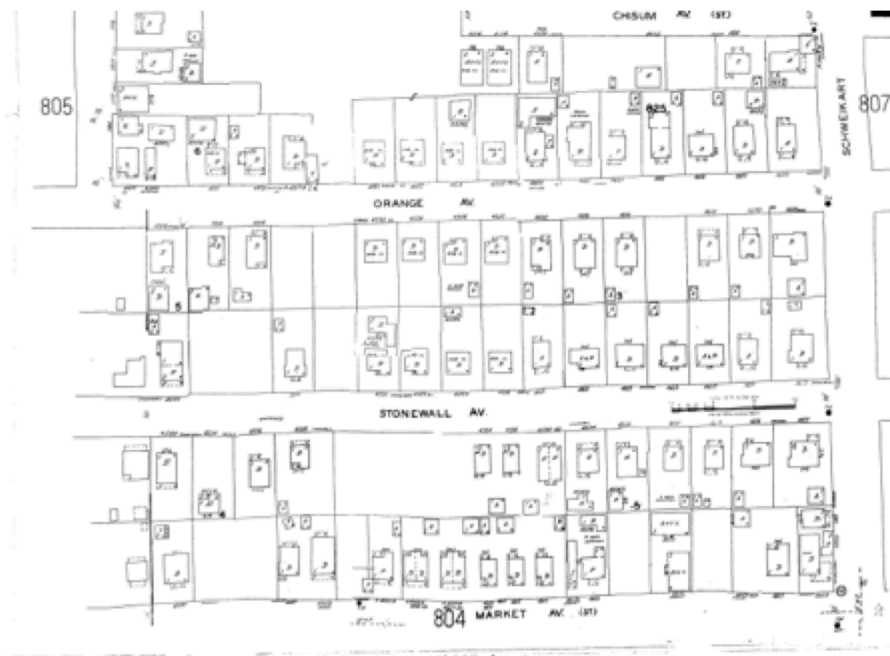
Houstonians who drove above the Third Ward to ignore the consequences the road they drove upon had brought to the communities that rested in its shadows.

At the same time that Third Warders were dealing with the construction of I-45 and the Pierce Elevated, residents of the Fifth Ward and the neighborhood just to the east, Denver Harbor, confronted the construction of Interstate 10 through their communities. Unlike I-45, I-10 ran below grade through the Fifth Ward. Highway planners viewed depressed routes as less disruptive to surrounding neighborhoods, yet, in the Fifth Ward, this configuration added additional concerns about pedestrian safety to continued complaints about abuse of eminent domain and a lack of citizen input. The interstate took a huge swath of homes and businesses from the neighborhoods alongside the route. Along Stonewall Street, just one example of an area that absorbed numerous costs, the road claimed three full blocks and thirty-four homes. The physical change is obvious in the Sanborn Map of the area and was repeated throughout the Fifth Ward.<sup>76</sup> (Figures 2.10 and 2.11)

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<sup>76</sup> *Polk's Houston (Harris County) City Directory* (Houston, TX: Polk, 1960), *Polk's Houston (Harris County) City Directory* (Houston, TX: Polk, 1970), DBCAH. The directories show the change to the streets alongside the road. Stonewall was one of several Fifth Ward Streets so drastically effected.





Figures 2.10 and 2.11: Fifth Ward Sanborn Maps  
 1950 and 1970 Sanborn Fire Insurances Company Maps for the Fifth Ward showing the cut across of I-10. Stonewall Street is featured here. 1950 map accessed through the University of Texas's UMI Sanborn Map Database, <http://sanborn.umi.com/> last accessed November 7, 2013. 1970 map scanned from microfilm collection of Sanborn maps at the HMRC.

Ramona Toliver, whose story opened the chapter, purchased a house on Tremper Street in the Fifth Ward in the late 1950s. When she moved in, her immediate neighborhood was home to many black professionals. The majority of the schoolteachers and the principal of Wheatley High School, which sat a few blocks to the south, lived nearby. Toliver recalled that other middle-class black residents settled in her part of the ward to take advantage of the updated infrastructure, especially the sewer system, which the city connected to school. Despite access to some amenities, like other predominantly black neighborhoods across Houston, Toliver's area of the Fifth Ward lacked paved streets, adequate street lighting, and had poor drainage. Some avenues, such as the one that paralleled her home to the south, were not even organized city streets, but rather informal lanes created by residents. Despite the challenges presented by the area's uneven mix of informal, underdeveloped, and developed infrastructure, Toliver remembered the area as a welcoming and desirable place to live.<sup>77</sup>

This version of the ward, however, would not survive the construction of I-10. Toliver's surprise the morning she confronted the state highway employee in her yard indicated how unaware many black residents were of the pending construction of the interstate. According to Toliver, neither she nor her neighbors were notified of the road prior to the appearance of the Texas Highway Department. Toliver prevented the loss of her property only by vociferously resisting plans and benefitting from the fact that officials had erred with their first survey. The highway department wanted to build the road as fast as possible and to avoid conflicts with residents that might bog down of the process or lead to organization against the road. When they resurveyed Toliver's

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<sup>77</sup> Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2012. Several histories of Houston describe the infrastructural challenges many Houston communities faced. See Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 210-264. David G. McComb, *Houston, the Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas, 1969), 209; Martin Melosi, "Houston's Public Sinks: Sanitary Services from Local Concerns to Regional Challenges," in Melosi and Pratt, *Energy Metropolis*, 109-147.

property, the highway department concluded that the frontage route needed only to run along the edge of her property not through her garage and moved their staves. Other African American residents whose homes were within the route of the interstate or frontage were not able to stop the state from taking their property. Some on Tremper saw their entire homes taken; others lost their backyards. The informal road below Toliver's home became the main route for the freeway.<sup>78</sup>

To Toliver and other residents, the building of the interstate accelerated a transition within the ward. By the end of the 1960s, shifts in population, land-use, and housing quality gave the Fifth Ward a very different demographic and physical landscape than it possessed in the previous decade. Once the Texas Highway Department established building lines, homeowners within them were prevented from improving their homes in order to keep property values low ahead of state purchase. This contributed to the physical deterioration of many structures.<sup>79</sup> Coupled with a decline in housing stock, in the early 1960s better off African Americans began to leave the ward as the repeal of segregation made formerly all-white areas of the city, such as MacGregor, available to blacks. Many of those displaced by the interstate joined these residents in the exodus from the community. Ms. E. Smith, an absentee owner of several Fifth Ward properties, recalled that even with relocation support, most of her renters resettled outside of the Fifth Ward due to the high prices and intense competition for housing within in the ward caused by the displaced scrambling to find shelter.<sup>80</sup> The departure of these residents

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<sup>78</sup> Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Algenita Scott Davis, interview by J.R. Wilson, July 19, 2006, interview #00624, transcript, Box 10, Houston History Project Collection (HHP), SCLUH.

<sup>80</sup> The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 was the first to mention relocation assistance for displaced residents and businesses. This was essential for renters, who before the act did not receive any compensation if the dwelling they rented were claimed. See the text for the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-76/pdf/STATUTE-76-Pg1145.pdf>, last accessed October 24, 2013.

drastically reshaped the demographics of the ward. In addition, the flight of consumers and their spending power—and a lack of exits off the freeway—combined to threaten the ward’s once vibrant business community along Lyons Avenue.<sup>81</sup>

The construction of the interstate also redefined the way residents moved through the neighborhood. Prior to the interstate, walking represented a major form of travel in the Fifth Ward. Ramona Toliver recalled that throughout the 1950s her side yard operated as a thoroughfare for students walking to Wheatley High School. Algenita Scott Davis and Beneva Williams, who were children during the construction of the interstate, likewise recalled the prevalence of walking in the ward and discussed the disruptions the road caused. Williams, who was also the plaintiff for one of Houston’s first integration lawsuits, remembered the Fifth Ward of the early 1950s as “open and free” with calm neighborhood streets.<sup>82</sup> She herself walked the length of the neighborhood each morning to get to junior high school at E.O. Smith, on the west side of the ward. The interstate, Williams said, changed all that. It “busted up” the community, making travel from one end to the other more difficult.<sup>83</sup> The construction of the interstate cut the Fifth Ward in half, separating residents from community institutions on the opposite of the road. Algenita Davis recalled that unlike the wealthy areas along US 59 that were served by ample overpasses, the Fifth Ward “didn’t get any cute little bridges...we just got a complete wipeout.”<sup>84</sup> (Figure 2.12). Because it took several years for adequate pedestrian bridges to be added, walking became more difficult and residents took to automobiles

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<sup>81</sup> Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2012. On lack of freeway exits Algenita Scott Davis, interview by J.R. Wilson, July 19, 2006.

<sup>82</sup> Beneva Williams, interview by J.R. Wilson, July 13, 2003, interview #00628, transcript, Box 10, HHP, SCLUH. On Williams and the desegregation case see McComb, *Houston*, 231; Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly*, 89-103.

<sup>83</sup> Beneva Williams, interview by J.R. Wilson, July 13, 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Algenita Davis, interview by J.R. Wilson, July 19, 2006.

even for routine neighborhood trips, changing their interactions with the community and city.<sup>85</sup>



Figure 2.12: I-10 and the Fifth Ward

View of I-10 through the Fifth Ward looking west. Location unspecified, it appears to be the intersection of Schweikhardt Street and I-10, putting Toliver's home on Tremper Street on the left side near the crane. Note the wide swath taken from the neighborhood and the paucity of crossings. One pedestrian bridge and one overpass are pictured here. Texas Department of Transportation, Communications Division, Media Production, Photo Library, December 3, 1964, Photographer unknown.

The shortage of safe crossings over the interstate did more than force residents into cars and split the neighborhood, it also contributed to several pedestrian deaths.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Both Toliver and Smith discussed the changes to their personal mobility patterns and the increase in car trips after the construction of the road. Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2012 and E. Smith, interview by author, April 18, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording. On the experiential significance of changing mobility modes from walking to driving, especially to interstates, see David Nye, "Redefining the American Sublime, From Open Road to Interstate," in Mari Hvattum, Brita Brenna, Beate Elvebakk, and Janike Kampevold Larsend, eds. *Routes, Roads, and Landscapes* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 99-112.

<sup>86</sup> The dangers presented by the location of transportation structure in or around lower-class neighborhoods has been a problem for African Americans for decades. For a recent example see Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012): 318-357.

After a number of accidents, including several that resulted in the deaths of local children, residents vocally advocated for the city to construct pedestrian bridges over the interstate, one of the first instances of collective action aimed at altering the highways.<sup>87</sup> As Davis suggested, for years only a handful of north-south thoroughfares crossed over the depressed freeway in the Fifth Ward or Denver Harbor. This lack of overpasses led to a rise in pedestrian-related accidents as local residents attempted to cross the interstate by foot. After years of pressing officials to build walkways over the road, residents of Denver Harbor finally assembled along the frontage roads of the interstate in April of 1970 to cut the ribbon on the first pedestrian bridge.<sup>88</sup>

The building of I-10 completely boxed in the Fifth Ward with transportation infrastructure. The absence of pedestrian and street overpasses added to an already established collection of structures that cut the ward off from the rest of the city. Significant rail yards had been a part of the neighborhood for decades and marked its northern boundary. The building of I-10 and US 59 created new southern and western borders for the ward and bisected the neighborhood. (Figure 2.13) The interchange for these two roads destroyed 36 square blocks of the Fifth Ward near downtown.<sup>89</sup> Residents on the north side of I-10 recalled feeling more cut off than ever from the rest of the city.<sup>90</sup> In Denver Harbor, congestion from commercial trucks serving the ship

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<sup>87</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, April 12, 1966, HMRC; Margaret Scanlan, "Boy Fatality of East Freeway," *Denver Harbor News*, May 12, 1970, Box 1, Folder 2, Margaret Scanlan Collection (MSC), MSS 266, HMRC.

<sup>88</sup> Margaret Scanlan, "Denver-Harbor CC Opens Crosswalk," *Denver Harbor News*, April 28, 1970, Box 1, Folder 2, MSC, HMRC.

<sup>89</sup> TxDOT Can 230/SRN006411, February 19, 1964, I-10/1-45-57, Texas Department of Transportation Aerial Photo Library, Austin, Texas.

<sup>90</sup> Reflections upon the Fifth Ward's physical boundaries come from an informal conversation by the author with long-time Fifth Ward resident Patricia Prather.



Figure 2.13: Aerial photograph of the Fifth Ward.

This 1964 Photo shows the ward boundaries created by transportation structures. The cleared area on the left is the construction of I-10. The Intersection is of I-10 and U.S. 59, which runs left to right in the middle of the picture. Train tracks cut across the north of the community. TxDOT Can 230/SRN006411, February 19, 1964, I-10/1-45-57, Texas Department of Transportation Aerial Photo Library, Austin, Texas.

channel, the body of water itself, the presence of I-10 to the north, and rail tracks to east boxed in that community and limited movement. To top it off, neither community would be served by meaningful public transportation until well into the 1970s.<sup>91</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: CITIZEN RESPONSE TO HIGHWAYS**

Citizens' questioning of Houston's non-stop highway building in the wards and Memorial Bend represented a shift in their ideas about the politics of mobility and encouraged more organized, longer-lasting actions. During the mid-1960s, when the physical problems faced by black and ethnic Mexican neighborhoods piled up and the consequences of interstate construction magnified the importance of controlling

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<sup>91</sup> Denver Harbor descriptions from City of Houston Department of Planning, "Denver Harbor/Port Houston Data Book," Box 2, CHPD, RG A 004, HMRC, 11.

community-level development, African American and ethnic Mexican activists, whose role in this fight will be explored in Chapter Three, pivoted their civil rights actions toward confronting the adverse effects of infrastructure construction and addressing service shortcomings in their neighborhoods.<sup>92</sup> White Houstonians throughout the HMA also continued to encounter infrastructure projects in their neighborhoods during the mid-to-late 1960s and attempted to broker outcomes that served their interests.

Changes in how African American Houstonians framed highways before and after their construction demonstrated the switch of transportation issues from the political backburner to the fore of civil rights campaigns. In the early 1960s, black leaders used highways as a rhetorical tool, labeling them harbingers of progress that could be used to illustrate broader civil rights goals. A 1960 article in the black-owned *Forward Times* described the struggle for racial equality as a “muddy road” and called on black Houstonians to “start draining off the water of poverty, filling in the low spots of dissoluteness and bringing the bulldozer of unity to scrape off the mud of ignorance.” Every resident needed to “pitch in and help with the paving.”<sup>93</sup> The article depicted roads, both physically and metaphorically, as crucial to the overall advancement of the city’s black population, as a path toward modernity. Just five years later, after the construction of I-10 through the Fifth Ward and I-45 through the Third, Algenita Davis, Beneva Williams, and Ernie Attwell expressed just the opposite sentiments with each lamenting

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<sup>92</sup> On the physical conditions facing black and ethnic Mexican communities see de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Bullard, *Invisible Houston*; Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008); Robert D. Bullard, “Dumping on Houston’s Black Neighborhoods,” in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 207-223; On shifts towards confronting such physical problems and poverty, much of which was rooted in the Community Action Program of the War on Poverty, see Clayson, *Freedom is not Enough*, 63-64, 80-83. For more on CAPs across the United States, Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 119-131; Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, eds., *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> “About Muddy Roads and Men,” *Forward Times*, April 16, 1960. DBCAH, 21.



the destruction the roads brought. They framed highways not as progress, but as a regression. The gap between these two depictions showed that the consequences of highway construction galvanized African Americans to forward a full-throated demand for improved infrastructure and participation in civic decision-making. By attempting to improve the physical conditions of their communities, these Houstonians began a new phase of civil rights struggle, one that would persist well into the 1980s.<sup>94</sup>

In 1967, black Houstonians protested in front of the Holmes Road Dump, which was one of many examples of polluting, dangerous land-uses in black neighborhoods. This protest marked the beginning of more than two decades of fights against the placement of such structures in black neighborhoods.<sup>95</sup> The chambers of the Houston City Council became another venue that black Houstonians used to air grievances about the physical issues they confronted, including the location of trash dumps, the poor state of neighborhood roads, a lack of adequate drainage, and the low levels of investment in black neighborhoods.<sup>96</sup> Residents used their votes and voices not only to express their dislike of current projects, but also to lobby for more resources to rebuild, rather than tear down or redevelop, their neighborhoods.

Black Houstonians were not the only ones who continued to encounter problems with road infrastructure through the mid-to-late 1960s. Residents in the predominantly white and wealthy near-downtown subdivision of Indian Trail fought against the routing of a major thoroughfare, Chimney Rock Road, through their community from 1963 until 1967. While the road's impact on the neighborhood would be a far cry from those caused

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<sup>94</sup> This push can be seen as the beginning of the environmental justice movement and a shift toward focusing on the physical inequalities that African American and ethnic Mexican urban dwellers faced. See Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

<sup>95</sup> Bullard, "Dumping on Houston's Black Neighborhoods," 219-221; Elizabeth Blum, "The Gunfighters of Northwood Manor: How History Debunks Myths of the Environmental Justice Movement," in Melosi and Pratt eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 224-240.

<sup>96</sup> See Houston City Council Minutes, HMRC.

by the Outer Loop or the interstates, residents' active resistance demonstrated the growing resolve of citizens to not be forced into accepting official infrastructure decisions.

Chimney Rock Road was a north-south boulevard planned to run the entirety of the city. By 1963 it had been constructed nearly to its northern terminus, lacking only a mile of road and a bridge over Buffalo Bayou. City planners did not anticipate any problems when they moved to construct the bridge and connect the road with Interstate 10. The details for the area were part of the city's earliest comprehensive plans and had been in the City of Houston Major Thoroughfare and Street Plan since the 1950s.<sup>97</sup> Planners saw the bridge as particularly important to metropolitan traffic flow, because, aside from the Inner Loop's bridge over the bayou, no local streets crossed the water between Shepherd Road in downtown Houston and Voss Road to the west, a distance of almost 5.5 miles.<sup>98</sup> Despite officials' assertions that the road was essential, a group of residents from Indian Trail solicited the support of the Houston City Council to stop the extension.

Articulating many of the same arguments as Memorial Bend residents, Indian Trail homeowners argued that the road would lower their property values and turn their neighborhood into a strip mall. Because the residents possessed significant economic and political resources, city council members listened to their demands and requested that the city attorney draw up an ordinance removing the extension of Chimney Rock from plans.<sup>99</sup> The planning commission scrambled to respond to what they believed was as an

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<sup>97</sup> See Chamber of Commerce, Master Freeway Plan, March 1954, Box 6, Folder 10, Oscar Holcombe Collection, MSS 20, HMRC; Houston Chamber of Commerce, "1975 Freeways and 1925 Thoroughfares," 1958, HMRC; Houston Planning Commission, "Plan for Major Thoroughfares and Freeways," 1957, Texas Reading Room Map Collection B3, HMRC.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Ralph Ellifrit to the Houston Planning Commission, September 25, 1963, Box 3, Folder 4, VRC, MSS 143, HMRC.

<sup>99</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, October 2, 1963, HMRC.

unprecedented and unwise action. Ralph Ellifrit cautioned that the council's choice set a dangerous precedent. Caving to the Chimney Rock residents, Ellifrit believed, made the entire "major thoroughfare system...vulnerable" to citizen resistance. Further, it threatened the city's ability to engage in "long-range planning" because fears "of continuing defeats" at the hands of residents might limit the options available to officials.<sup>100</sup> With the Memorial Bend dispute fresh in his mind, Ellifrit worried that altering the major street plan because of complaints from a small group of residents would foster hundreds of other such complaints and hamstring movement throughout the city.

After the council passed the removal ordinance, the planning commission announced that it would not remove the extension from its thoroughfare plan. This disagreement led to a legal battle over which entity could impel the actions of the other, and which had the ultimate say in directing Houston's growth.<sup>101</sup> When Louie Welch took over as mayor in 1964, he announced that his administration would back the planning commission and construction plans went forward. When, in 1965, the City Council considered a motion to buy the remaining parcels of right-of-way, residents made a final push to resist the project. Welch and the commission held firm. Just as Memorial Bend residents were told that the Outer Belt was needed for the greater good, residents in the vicinity of Chimney Rock were informed that that the bridge was essential to easing citywide traffic problems and opening Northwest Houston to economic development.<sup>102</sup> In the end the Chimney Rock Road fight served as both

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Ralph Ellifrit to the Houston Planning Commission, September 25, 1963, Box 3, Folder 4, VRC, MSS 143, HMRC.

<sup>101</sup> "Planning Board Insisting, Open Chimney Rock: Overrides Council on Thoroughfare, Refusal to OK subdivision Plat Reopens Fight" *Houston Press*, December 31, 1963, VRC, Box 3, Folder 6, HMRC.

<sup>102</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, January 27, 1965, HMRC.

another example of the limits of citizen influence over planning changes and as a signal of the continuing commitment of Houstonians to resist projects they viewed as damaging.

The debates around the road projects discussed above marked attacks on the top-down, official-driven highway planning and construction program that held sway in Houston during the late 1950s and early 1960s. They also signaled the emergence of a system in which citizens became progressively more involved with decisions about the city's transportation network. This change, however, did not represent the end of unequal decision-making in Houston. Wealthy developers such as Roy Hofheinz still possessed a great deal of sway; white suburbanites succeeded in getting their complaints aired with local officials more easily than their black neighbors. Yet, by the end of the decade it was clear that Houstonians from across the city were no longer willing to absorb the consequences of construction without at least some say in its foundational decisions.

Taken together, protests by African American and ethnic Mexican citizens about service problems and Indian Trail residents' fight against Chimney Rock Road represented fundamental challenges to the city's development status quo. Each of these fights was a reaction to the destruction wrought by earlier road projects and built upon the nascent resistance of Houstonians to such disruption. Between 1945 and 1960, city officials dealt with the HMA's rapid expansion by building the systems they needed and expecting residents to accept them. When the required structures reached the size of interstates and major highways, though, citizens could no longer ignore the impact. Like Ralph Ellifrit, many officials worried that the pushback would derail long-range growth plans and threaten Houston's connection to its growing suburban fringe.<sup>103</sup> Citizen action raised the stakes on such concerns over the coming years. A nearly decade-long fight against a proposed state highway in which ethnic Mexican Houstonians played a central

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<sup>103</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, January 27, 1965, HMRC

role represented just such a conflict. Houstonians' encounters with the construction and consequences of transportation structures in the 1960s led many to form new notions of the politics of mobility and sparked the involvement of a broader population of non-elite and non-professional Houstonians in the planning of the city.

### **Chapter Three**

## **“Only You Can Prevent Another Freeway”<sup>1</sup>: The Harrisburg Freeway and the Struggle to Shape a Neighborhood**

In the mid-1960s Richard Holgin was sitting on the front porch of his family’s Avenue L home in Magnolia Park when his teenage nephew ran up to share some disturbing news. A rumor was floating around the community that the Texas Highway Department planned to “build a freeway through” Magnolia Park. In fact, according to his nephew, the road would run “right over [Holgin’s] house” on its way through Houston’s East End neighborhoods toward downtown. Looking out at the streets of the tight-knit, predominantly ethnic Mexican community in which he grew up, Holgin feared that such a project would tear it apart. Shortly after speaking with his nephew, Holgin confirmed the veracity of the rumor: since the early 1960s officials from the city and the Houston office of the highway department had been steadily working on plans to run a highway through the East End.<sup>2</sup> Aware of the destruction brought to other central city neighborhoods by the ongoing construction of Interstate 10 and State Highway 59, Holgin, one of a small minority of ethnic Mexican East Enders with a college education, led several of his neighbors in a struggle to halt the project.<sup>3</sup>

Over the subsequent decade, the contest around the Harrisburg Freeway proposal saw a mainly working-class, predominantly ethnic Mexican group of protestors resist the

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Landron, “Freeway Kills—City Thinks” *Papel Chicano*, April 11, 1970, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012, San Antonio, Texas, audio recording. I define the East End as the combination of the Second Ward, Magnolia Park, Harrisburg, Eastwood, and Lawndale neighborhoods. Holgin confirmed the rumors by attending an early community information meeting about the road at a neighborhood church. He believes it was either 1963 or 1964.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 1960 US Census only 1.6 percent of East End residents had a college degree. Social explorer, 1960 U.S. Census, Tracts 19, 20, 21, and 22; [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed March 15, 2014.

plans of authorities from both local and state governments.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the panoply of protest tactics they employed to delay the road planning process, opponents of the roadway also benefitted from shifts in federal highway policy and regulation, a national upsurge in resistance against urban highways, and a timely state-level budget crunch. The coalescence of these factors resulted in the blocking of the road's construction and its eventual removal from the Texas State Highway plan. While ostensibly about the roadway, the conflict came to represent a larger struggle that pitted two visions for the future of east Houston against one another. As officials tried to shape the community into a form they believed would best facilitate central city and suburban growth, resident opponents articulated alternative visions to maintain the integrity of their neighborhoods and stop discriminatory decision-making.<sup>5</sup> The struggle increasingly fomented questions about civil rights, political power, and the meaning of place.

Added to Houston's Major Thoroughfare and Highway Plan in 1963 and to the State Highway Plan in 1969, the route for the proposed Harrisburg freeway connected with State Highway 225 on the east side of Loop 610 and ran to downtown Houston, cutting through the predominantly ethnic Mexican, working-class neighborhoods of Harrisburg, Magnolia Park and the Second Ward along the way.<sup>6</sup> As planning for the route progressed in the late 1960s, the process threatened to repeat the same pattern of

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<sup>4</sup> Dock Burke, P.K. Guseman, J.L. Buffington, and D.L. Schafer, "Evaluation of Residents' Attitudes and Expectations of a Planned Freeway," (College Station: Texas Transportation Institute (TTI)/Texas Highway Department (THD), 1974) TTI Report 148-6, THD Study 2-1-71-148, iv; Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of how "community identity" can act as both an internal understanding of a specific place and as a frame for larger political action see Kevin Gotham "Political Opportunity, Community Identity, and the Emergence of a local Anti-Expressway Movement," *Social Problems* 46(3) (1999): 332-354.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of Transportation; Federal Highway Administration; Texas Highway Department, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement for State Highway 225 from U.S. 59 to Lawndale Avenue in Houston, Harris County, Texas," FHWA-TEX\_EIS-730977-D, 7; Minutes of the Texas Highway Commission, Minute Order 62158, April 2, 1969, Box 1998/069-5, Texas State Archives (TSA).

heavy central city displacements as earlier road projects like the Pierce Elevated and Interstate 10 in the Fifth Ward. Just as with these projects, city and state officials hoped the new route would alleviate traffic problems on the city's highways and improve the mobility of Houston's growing suburban population. Aware of, but not overly sympathetic to, the disruption caused of displacing hundreds of Houstonians, officials argued that such uprootings were inevitable in the burgeoning city. Officials explained to frustrated residents that unlike projects started at a time when Houston was so "spread out that" planners had "been able to find holes" through which to run roads, by the 1960s the city's rapidly filling urban landscape meant that "there [were] just no holes" for new roadways, so they needed to be created.<sup>7</sup> Officials told East End residents whose homes lay within the potential rights-of-way that such plans needed to be implemented for the greater good of the city.

While, overall, residents of the East End generally approved of the freeway, many ethnic Mexican residents of Magnolia Park and Harrisburg did not accept that their homes would be cleared in the name of progress. Those who saw the road in a positive light believed it would shorten their daily commutes into downtown Houston and make travel to other parts of the city easier. The push made by the group of residents against the highway represented a very different vision of the politics of mobility and definitively altered the fate of the project.<sup>8</sup> Road opponents in the East End argued that the highway

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<sup>7</sup> "Houston Most Auto-Dominated City Next to LA," *Houston Chronicle*, February 22, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Burke, et. al., "Evaluation of Residents' Attitudes and Expectations," 9-20. The study found that overall 70 percent of East End residents surveyed approved of the highway plan with 15 percent opposed and 15 percent expressing no opinion. Controlling for Anglo residents the approval rating rose to 78 percent, but among ethnic Mexicans it dropped to 66 percent. This difference demonstrates a higher level of skepticism among the East End's ethnic Mexican population toward the project. The study also concludes that the primary opposition arose from the ethnic Mexican residents of Harrisburg and Magnolia Park.





Figure 3.1: Harrisburg Freeway Proposal

The proposed route of the Harrisburg Freeway extension, the bold black line above, ran from the intersection of SH 225 and Interstate 610 to downtown crossing through Harrisburg, Magnolia Park, and the Second Ward. Texas Highway Department, “Draft Environmental Impact Statement for State Highway 225,” FHWA-TEX\_EIS-730977-D, 21.

was another abusive infrastructure project that benefitted the wealthier parts of the metropolitan area, while foisting the consequences of construction onto African American and ethnic Mexican communities. By voicing dissent to what they saw as discriminatory planning methods, ethnic Mexican East Enders challenged the lack of citizen input involved in civic decision-making. This opposition made it clear that a uniform definition of “good” mobility did not exist in Houston. Indeed, their campaign against the road illustrated that various groups possessed divergent, often contradictory, understandings of the concept and its role in daily life. During the Harrisburg fight, ethnic Mexican Houstonians forced their visions for the future of their neighborhoods and for

the city into public view and in the process changed the nature of Houston's infrastructure development.

The actions taken by ethnic Mexican highway opponents overlapped with and built upon other ongoing civil rights struggles in which Houstonians of color advocated for greater control over and access to economic, political, and mobility rights. By the 1970s, ethnic Mexicans in the East End, like African Americans in the city's Third and Fifth Wards, had been engaged in campaigns for civil rights for several decades. In the ethnic Mexican East End, those campaigns centered mainly on education, employment, and voting rights.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s a conflict over school integration erupted in the city's ethnic Mexican neighborhoods. For decades Houstonians of Mexican origin were considered white and during school desegregation efforts Houston leaders used this categorization to place black and ethnic Mexican children in the same schools and claim that such actions represented black-white integration. Ethnic Mexican Houstonians responded by rejecting whiteness, instead insisting that they belonged to separate racial category and that the school district needed to fully integrate black, brown,

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Mohl and Mark Rose have argued that many of the national upsurges in highway revolts can be linked with other civil rights victories, see Raymond Mohl and Mark Rose, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy Since 1939*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 113-134. Likewise, Joseph DiMento and Cliff Ellis argue that the negative impact urban highways had on lives in American cities pushed both planning professionals and citizens to react against new road plans by the 1960s. See Joseph DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012). For a sample of works dealing with ethnic Mexican civil rights fights in Houston, see Guadalupe San Miguel, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Arnolde de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston* (Houston, Tex.: University of Houston Press, 1989); Brian Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

and white children in city schools.<sup>10</sup> Many of the actors involved in the Harrisburg Freeway fight participated in these other civil rights campaigns. These overlapping battles helped to radicalize a large proportion of the city's ethnic Mexican population and empowered them to voice their shared frustrations about education, police brutality, poor city services, and discrimination.

While the act of moving through the city may seem secondary to the essential political and social rights pursued by more recognized civil rights campaigns, those Houstonians who pushed against the Harrisburg plan came to believe that unhindered and equal access to systems of mobility represented an important piece of the larger push for civil rights. Ethnic Mexican protestors—who urged the city to consider alternative transportation structures, sought the just distribution of the physical costs of transportation systems, and who demanded a local voice in planning efforts—made the Harrisburg fight into an important iteration of the local civil rights struggle. As a result of the city's multifaceted civil rights actions and changing federal laws, by the mid-1970s, Houston's ethnic Mexican and African American citizens constituted a much more significant electoral bloc than they did a decade earlier.

Beyond fighting over the roadway, officials and residents also sparred for the power to define and control the parts of the city through which the road would run. Each side attempted to characterize the landscapes of the East End in ways that best suited their desired ends. Two reports—a required environmental impact statement (EIS) produced by state and city officials for the road project and a Model Cities publication issued by the Houston's Neighborhood Improvement Program about neighborhood

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<sup>10</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, argues that the fight in Houston around the topic of school integration helped radicalize a vast majority of the city's ethnic Mexican population. This fight began almost simultaneously with the build up to the Harrisburg Freeway conflict. See also Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 154-194.

renovation—captured the very different perspectives the Texas Highway Department and residents of the East End held of the community. Each of the reports reflected changes to federal participation in the governance of major public works projects and cities. Required EIS for all federally-funded projects was a product of the National Environmental Policy Act passed in 1969. Model Cities was a federal program initiated during the War on Poverty to get funds to poverty-stricken neighborhoods. The EIS depicted the East End, particularly Magnolia Park and Harrisburg, as rundown and outdated. It claimed that the roadway could encourage urban renewal in the East End. Residents fought to maintain the residential nature of their neighborhoods. In the Model Cities report and in their public comments about the road, they argued that their communities were viable and productive parts of the city. They feared that the road’s construction would render their streets unrecognizable, disrupt their patterns of living, disconnect them from the city at large, and accelerate the environmental breakdown of their already stressed landscape.<sup>11</sup> Like suburban Houstonians nervous about the impact of Interstate 610 on their homes and lives, ethnic Mexican activists articulated their concerns about the road through arguments that focused on issues of mobility, place, and the environment.<sup>12</sup> Those opposed to the freeway voiced these concerns at community meetings, to their elected officials, and among their neighbors. Their actions made it clear that never again would mobility decisions emerge solely from a room of officials pouring over maps in search of “holes” through which to run roads.

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<sup>11</sup> Burke et. al., “Evaluation of Residents’ Attitudes,” 43.

<sup>12</sup> This chapter’s discussion of place-making and resident/official conceptions of landscapes relies greatly on the idea of framing historical work through an “ethic of place,” which allows for a given landscape or space to be understood as a collection of definitions and viewpoints from a variety of actors, as well as taking into account the physical, natural landscape itself. This idea comes from Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

## SITUATING THE DEBATE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF EAST HOUSTON COMMUNITIES

Real estate developers came to east Houston in the early 1900s and conceived of the area as a potential suburban haven in the shadow of downtown. However, due to its position on the edge of the Houston Ship Channel east Houston had transformed by the 1920s into one of the leading industrial areas in the city. Shipping companies, cotton compresses, and manufacturing centers clustered along the ship channel seeking easy access to the Gulf of Mexico. At the same time, residential communities such as Magnolia Park and the Second Ward grew up alongside this industry, housing the laborers who flocked to the area in search of jobs or because of connections with already settled families and friends.<sup>13</sup> Magnolia Park became one of Houston's earliest ethnic Mexican barrios. By the end of World War II, as the area's industries transitioned to the petrochemical and heavy manufacturing interests that would drive Houston's postwar expansion, the residential communities continued to grow apace.

By the beginning of the Harrisburg Freeway debate in the mid-1960s, east Houston communities featured factories, warehouses, and train tracks interspersed with homes, schools, and churches. The factories projected a decidedly industrial landscape dominated by commercial infrastructure and facilities, relegating the residential and natural elements of the area to the background. By the 1970s, industrial land use in a corridor that encompassed both Magnolia Park and Harrisburg stood at twenty-one percent, more than five percent higher than the city average. The communities' commercial usage stood at sixteen percent.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the physical presence of the factories and shops, the industrial landscape—its processes, infrastructure requirements, and detritus—also left unseen marks upon the area in the form of pollution and toxicity. It

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<sup>13</sup> de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 3-42.

<sup>14</sup> City of Houston Department of Planning, "Magnolia Park/Harrisburg-Manchester Data Book, 1976," City of Houston Department of Planning Records (CHPD), RG A 004, Box 2, HMRC, 22.

was this legacy, as much as the buildings themselves, with which residents contended on a daily basis.

The area's industry served as the foundation for the social and economic activity of the area. In east Houston communities, almost a third of adult residents worked at either one of the numerous factories on 76<sup>th</sup> street or along the docks.<sup>15</sup> Just as industrial byproducts seeped into the landscape, so too did the patterns of industrial life engrain themselves into every facet of life. Residents timed their daily commutes around slow moving freight trains; they avoided impromptu garbage dumps outside of factories; they awoke to the whistles of oil barges and container ships. Unlike Houstonians whose homes sat in the shadows of the growing downtown, east Houston residents experienced the extreme nature of Houston's economic growth first hand. While they benefitted from the many opportunities created by the city's burgeoning economy, they also absorbed—physically and cognitively—the consequences that came with living in an industrial neighborhood.<sup>16</sup> For residents whose homes rested among and behind the walls of factories and warehouses, the surrounding landscape shaped the way they lived their lives and affected how they interpreted their places within the city.

People, not just landscapes, defined these communities. At the time of the freeway fight ethnic Mexicans dominated the demographics of both the Second Ward and Magnolia Park, while Harrisburg and Manchester saw a closer split between ethnic Mexican and white Houstonians. Other East End neighborhoods such as Lawndale,

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<sup>15</sup> USDOT; FHWA; THD, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement," 7; See also Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 20, 2012; Frank Partida, interview by author, March 5, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph A. Pratt, "A Mixed Blessing: Energy, Economic Growth, and Houston's Environment," in Martin Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Region* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 21-51; Hugh S. Gorman, "The Houston Ship Channel and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Pollution," in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 52-68. Both Pratt and Gorman discuss the costs and benefits of living along the Ship Channel. Proximity brought access to jobs, but also created grave environmental risks.

Eastwoods, and Pecan Park were predominantly white.<sup>17</sup> Chinese and African American Houstonians had a small but meaningful presence in the neighborhoods, particularly Magnolia Park. Chinese immigrants operated several grocery stores there and African American laborers and their families clustered near the union hall of the all-black International Longshoremen's Association Local 872.<sup>18</sup> Neither group participated vocally in the Harrisburg Freeway fight. East Houston communities were especially dense as well. In 1970 the citywide average was 14.4 people per acre. In the east Houston corridor from Magnolia Park to Harrisburg the population density stood at 23.4 people per acre.<sup>19</sup> Such density guaranteed that any major infrastructure projects in the area would displace a large number of residents.

East Houston—an industrial-residential world, populated by working-class Houstonians from a variety of backgrounds—became the site for the fight over the Harrisburg Freeway. East End residents—who alternately tolerated, benefitted from, and complained about their landscape—approached the highway project with a mix of opinions ranging from acceptance, to resignation, to indignation.<sup>20</sup> No matter how they viewed the road itself, what became clear was that each resident possessed a preconceived notion of their neighborhood and its landscape. Further, each held his or her

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<sup>17</sup> Burke et. al. "Evaluations of Residents' Attitudes," 7; See also the census tract level data for these neighborhoods that demonstrates the predominant ethnic makeup of the East End as a mix of white and ethnic Mexican residents in both 1960 and 1970, with the percentage of ethnic Mexican residents rising in most census tracts between the decades. Houston Census Tract Level data accessed through Social Explorer, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed November 30, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Partida, interview by author, March 5, 2012. Also an informal interview with Gordon Quan of Houston, whose parents and uncles operated grocery stores in Magnolia Park and lived in the community. For more information about ILA Local 872 see Rebecca Montes, "Working for American Rights: Black, White, and Mexican American Dockworkers in Texas During the Great Depression," (PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005.)

<sup>19</sup> City of Houston Dept. of Planning "Magnolia Park/Harrisburg-Manchester Data Book," 22.

<sup>20</sup> Burke et. al. "Evaluations of Residents' Attitudes"; and Dock Burke, Jesse Buffington, and Hugo Meuth, "Attitudes, Opinions, and Expectations of Businessmen in a Planned Freeway Corridor," (College Station: Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), 1972), TTI Report 148-2.

own idea about what the road might mean to movements through the city and the community. From this diverse array of opinions, a solid knot of ethnic Mexican residents—linked by a mutual fear of the road and a distrust of the city’s power brokers—emerged to resist the highway’s construction.

### **EARLIER COMMUNITY CONFLICTS**

The area’s industry-centric makeup provides a clue to many residents opposition to the Harrisburg Freeway. Well before the fight against the highway, East Enders had taken stands against toxic pollutants, poor city services, and dangerous transportation crossings, showing a desire not only to remove hazards from their communities, but also to define the shape of their neighborhoods. While East Enders divided over the proposed highway, in earlier fights residents presented a united front against mutual problems. Experiences with industrial and infrastructural issues, as well as an awareness of the destructive nature of Interstate 10 through the Fifth Ward, contributed to some residents’ choices to resist the freeway. Further, earlier struggles to shape the neighborhood and curtail damaging practices prepared those residents who opposed the freeway for the struggle against it.<sup>21</sup>

One major conflict that had arisen from the industrial-residential nature of the East End centered on the near constant movement of train and truck traffic around Ship Channel industrial complexes. In 1960, white and ethnic Mexican residents from the Harrisburg area complained to the Houston City Council about a traffic problem caused

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<sup>21</sup> On lack of public services and environmental hazards facing the ship channel neighborhoods see de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 60-75; Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008); Bullard, “Dumping on Houston’s Black Neighborhoods,” in Martin Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 207-223; David McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 209; Joe Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political and Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 210-264; Melosi, “Houston’s Public Sinks: Sanitary Services from Local Concerns to Regional Challenges,” in Melosi and Pratt, eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 109-147.



by a long line of idling semis in the community. Vehicles came and went at all hours of the day—disrupting sleep, straining infrastructure, and filling the communities with dangerous traffic. In an attempt to exert some control over their neighborhood, residents asked the City Council to pass regulations that prevented trucks from clogging their streets at all hours of the day.<sup>22</sup> They also issued complaints about high train volume, which likewise disrupted easy movement in the communities, and fourteen at-grade train crossings that snarled traffic during the peak hours.<sup>23</sup> The complaints against truck and train traffic centered not just on the disruptions caused by the presence of the two systems, but also on the limitations they imposed onto the daily movements of East End residents. Influenced by these earlier experiences, many residents worried that the construction of the road would worsen, not improve, traffic in their community.

On top of facing logistical costs of living within an industrial landscape, East End residents also had to contend with some of the worst provision of public services in the entire city. Due to Houston's territorial and demographic growth in the postwar period, the city struggled to provide basic services. The shortfalls in service fell onto the newest of suburbs and the oldest, poorest central city neighborhoods. So, while wealthier central city neighborhoods had better maintained roadways and received the bulk of drainage work, well into the 1960s working-class, predominantly minority communities struggled with unpaved or poorly maintained roads, faced dire problems during times of floods, and saw their communities fall into disrepair.<sup>24</sup> Facing these issues head on, ethnic Mexican

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<sup>22</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, September 14, 1960, HMRC.

<sup>23</sup> Texas Highway Commission Public Hearing Docket, March 6, 1969, Box 2002/101-35, Folder "Harris County, Re: Highway Matters in the Houston Area," TSA, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Problems with service delivery have been discussed in a number of places including Joe Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 210-288; Martin Melosi, *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 158-188; Kyle Shelton, "Houston (Un)Limited: Path-Dependent Annexation and Highway Practices in an American Metropolis," *Transfers: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Mobility History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 97-115.

East Enders attended Houston City Council meetings and implored council members to help them rid their community of trash, rats, and vacant homes so they could “pursue decent and healthy lives.” Pointing to a disparity in services between wealthy and impoverished neighborhoods, these residents lamented the fact that they were “last on the totem pole” for services and argued that as taxpayers they deserved adequate and equal service. They were “not asking them [council] to do something for us that they are not doing for the whole city.”<sup>25</sup>

Residents feared that the new road would add to already significant levels of water and air pollution in the community. By 1970, the Ship Channel—which east Houston residents lived along, worked near, and, at one time, swam and fished in—was one of the most polluted waterways in the nation.<sup>26</sup> Opponents of the road also worried that the highway would compound the already dangerous air pollution levels experienced in the densely packed industrial neighborhoods. Emissions from industrial vehicles and factories left east Houston communities covered in a haze of “fumes, odors, dirt, and smut” and residents were concerned that a highway would intensify these problems.<sup>27</sup> Providing concrete justification for these misgivings, in 1970 residents of Harrisburg noticed a massive die-off of birds in their community. Residents immediately blamed air pollution as the cause of the bird-kill. After city officials failed to take action, numerous residents, led by a contingent of children ranging from age five to thirteen, marched to

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<sup>25</sup> “Harrisburg Citizens Invite Welch to Live Amidst Trash, Rats.” *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 1970, H-City Council-1970s Vertical File (VF), HMRC. For a breakdown of the poor quality of service provision to minority and lower-income communities see, City of Houston Dept. of Planning, “Magnolia Park/Harrisburg-Manchester Data Book.”

<sup>26</sup> “US Aide Tours Area: Channel Pollution Rated in 10 Worst,” *Houston Post*, January 19, 1970, Box 29, Folder 9, George Fuermann Collection (GFC), Special Collections Library University of Houston (SCLUH); Frank Partida, interview by author, March 5, 2012; Gorman, “The Houston Ship Channel and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Pollution,” in Melosi and Pratt eds., *Energy Metropolis*, 52-68.

<sup>27</sup> City of Houston Department of Planning, “Houston’s Neighborhood Improvement Planning Program: Magnolia Park,” Box 1, Folder 9, CHPD, RG A 004, HMRC, 30-31.

the gates of one of the worst polluting companies, blocked a number of trucks from entering the facility, and demanded the company decrease the amount of pollution it created.<sup>28</sup>

The above examples capture a small sample of the struggles that east Houston residents waged against environmental and infrastructural problems in their communities prior to the fight against the freeway. At the most basic level each of these fights originated in residents' desires to maintain or improve the character of their communities and the health of their families. When plans for the Harrisburg Freeway were announced, many residents viewed the proposal through a lens colored by these previous experiences and did not like what they saw. Confronting the environmental problems facing their communities allowed east Houston residents to articulate their own approach to creating a healthy and productive neighborhood. Their public activism provided them with entrée into larger conversation about the city and its future. With highway construction looming, residents who saw the road as yet another threat to their communities responded, as they had numerous times before, by organizing against the project and asserting themselves into metropolitan politics.

### **THE FREEWAY PLAN**

Texas Highway Department officials possessed a different picture of the Harrisburg Freeway than the residents who opposed it. In the initial planning stages, officials believed that the roadway would meet the two primary goals the agency hoped to achieve with each of its new highway projects: the creation and support of suburban mobility and the stimulation of citywide economic growth. Specifically, officials envisioned that the freeway would ease traffic problems between downtown Houston and

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<sup>28</sup> Maggie Landron, "Children March in Manchester," *Papel Chicano*, April 1, 1970, HMRC, 3.

the quickly growing southeastern suburbs. In addition, they believed that the roadway would encourage the continued industrial and commercial development of the city's ship channel. Prior to the blossoming of local opposition against the road, officials and city boosters promoted the suburban mobility and economic growth as arguments for the proposed freeway.<sup>29</sup>

Kindled by wartime production demands, the industrial suburbs of Pasadena and La Porte had experienced massive economic and population growth beginning in the early 1940s. This expansion continued after the war and officials in Houston and its satellite towns moved to control it by linking industrial areas with the larger city. In the early 1950s the major east-west link between Houston and its eastern suburbs was the locally dubbed La Porte-Houston highway (later State Highway 225), a small road ill-suited to the high volumes of traffic officials believed continued growth would soon bring.<sup>30</sup> In order to provide better road access to the Ship Channel, Houston officials called for the construction of a spur road to connect the Gulf Freeway and the La Porte-Houston highway. At a meeting of the Texas Highway Commission in July of 1950, leaders from the Houston Chamber of Commerce, joined by elected officials from Houston and Harris County, went further by lobbying for the expansion of southeastern Harris County's roadways.<sup>31</sup> The desired spur was constructed, but quickly thereafter it

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<sup>29</sup> The economic growth argument forwarded by Houston officials for infrastructure projects was similar to those used by politicians and officials in other growing American cities at the time, particularly in the Sunbelt, to justify mobility and general infrastructure projects. For examples from Phoenix see Philip VanderMeer, *Desert Visions and the Making of Phoenix, 1860-2009* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010). For Los Angeles see Jonathon Richmond, *Transport of Delight: The Mythical Conception of Rail Transit in Los Angeles* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2005). For Atlanta see Miriam Konrad, *Transporting Atlanta: The Mode of Mobility Under Construction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed description of Highway 225's history and construction see Erik Slotboom, *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey*, (Cincinnati, OH: C.J. Krehbiel, 2003), 194.

<sup>31</sup> Public Hearing Docket, Texas Transportation Commission, July 1, 1950, Box 2002/101-72, Folder "Harris County, 7/1/50, Continued Development of Highways in Houston," TSA; "3,000,000 Addition to Freeway Announced," *Houston* December 1950, 58, HMRC.

became clear that a more permanent and higher-capacity road would be required. In 1953, at the urging of local officials, the Texas Highway Commission designated Highway 225 as an official state highway. The original iteration of the road stretched from the outskirts of east Houston to Highway 146 in east Harris County.<sup>32</sup> Markedly absent from this designation, however, was a connection between downtown Houston and the end of the road.

As construction of Highway 225 between Houston's Loop 610 and its eastern suburbs began in the 1960s, a simultaneous push for the extension of the road into the heart of Houston picked up speed. In 1961, a report titled *Preliminary Freeway Phase* first suggested the running of a freeway from the western terminus of 225 into the heart of downtown.<sup>33</sup> As a part of the larger Houston Metropolitan Transportation and Transit Study, the report highlighted several yet-to-be-designated projects that the city required in order to grow, including the Harrisburg Freeway extension.<sup>34</sup> Officials hoped that a downtown-225 link could relieve the growing traffic problems of the Gulf Freeway by shunting the LaPorte/Pasadena commuters off of the Gulf Freeway and onto 225.<sup>35</sup> Because of the hefty financial commitments and priority given to the interstate system, the Texas Highway Department did not immediately adopt the Harrisburg extension. Despite this inaction, local officials, confident that in due time the route would be added to the state plan, continued clearing the way by conducting feasibility studies and planning possible routes.

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<sup>32</sup> Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 194; Texas Highway Commission Minute Order 34178, September 23, 1953, TSA.

<sup>33</sup> Houston Metropolitan Transportation and Transit Study, "Preliminary Freeway Phase," August, 1961, Texas Department of Transportation, Houston Branch, Planning Library Records.

<sup>34</sup> City of Houston Planning Commission, "A Study of Thoroughfare Development in Southeast Area of Metropolitan Houston and Harris County," 1963, CHPD, RG A 004, Box 1, Folder 13, HMRC, 1.

<sup>35</sup> "Would Ease Traffic," *Houston Chronicle*, July 1961.

Almost immediately upon making plans for the Harrisburg extension public, city and state officials started receiving inquiries about the road from Houstonians anxious either for the construction to begin or wary of its costs. As we saw in the opening anecdote, as Houstonians like Richard Holgin heard about road plans many contacted both the highway department and the city of Houston to learn the details. As early as 1963, so many inquiries came into highway department offices that they asked the Houston City Planning Department to stop forwarding questions about the road until it was officially a state highway project. In an interoffice memo the city planning department told employees to ensure inquiring parties, that far from having set its plans in stone, Houston had only just begun a “number of alignment studies.” To those nervous about their homes, the city would offer assurances that the freeway’s construction was “at least eight to ten years in the future.” In the same memo, however, officials noted that a general alignment had already been selected running just north of Harrisburg Avenue through the Second Ward and Magnolia Park before cutting down through Harrisburg and joining up with the under construction State Highway 225.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that the local officials continued to make plans for the highway despite a lack of commitment from the highway department demonstrates the momentum of road projects during the 1950s and 1960s. It also hints at the task facing opponents who hoped to stop them. Road planning often began ten years before any construction took place. As officials committed resources and planning toward the project, its completion became more and more likely. Even if they conducted public hearings or sought feedback from the public, these activities rarely resulted in changes to the entrenched plans. This practice made the alteration or rollback of projects difficult if not impossible. The city

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<sup>36</sup> City of Houston Department of Planning Interoffice Memo, April 5, 1963, La Porte Freeway Extension File (LPFE), CHPD, Erik Slotboom Research Collection (ESRC).

and county began the planning steps early in hopes of having the required infrastructure in place when the Highway Commission finally moved on the route. This approach precluded the incorporation of citizen feedback and resulted in a muddled public picture of the project and its timeline. The relative lack of transparency stoked the anxiety of residents like Holgin, who heard rumors of potential plans, but lacked access to any concrete details.

The City of Houston was one of the main actors in preparing the foundation for the extension prior to the announcement of any official plans. In addition to settling on a preliminary location for the route, the City Council instructed numerous departments to take the initial steps required to prepare for construction. In 1963, director of city planning Ralph Ellifrit asked the real estate department to investigate the required right-of-way purchases along the proposed route and to begin those purchases.<sup>37</sup> In 1964, the City Council established building lines, which restricted property owners from building new structures or making significant improvements to existing structures, in hopes of keeping right-of-way costs down.<sup>38</sup> To residents and business owners in the area, this move signaled the concrete possibility that the road would be coming through their neighborhood, compounding fears that homes and neighborhood were at risk.

As officials laid the groundwork for the extension into downtown, they continued to lobby the State Highway Commission to designate the extension a state highway route. The Houston Chamber of Commerce worked closely with city and county officials in their efforts to the gain designation, which would bring significant state assistance to the project. At a Chamber meeting attended by A.C. Keyser, the head engineer of the Texas Highway Department's Houston Urban Project, Chamber, city, and county leaders

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from Ralph Ellifrit to Earl Martin, August 28, 1963, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>38</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, October 13, 1964, HMRC, 23.

pitched the importance of beginning the route as soon as possible. The director of the Houston Traffic and Transportation Department, Eugene Maier, pointed out that the southeastern parts of the city and county were “seriously deficient in freeway facilities,” a problem that would result in “major congestion unless immediate plans are developed for the construction of additional freeways.” Chamber members from Humble Oil and Foley’s Department Store supported the extension plan in hopes that it would lower shipping costs and offer commercial access to the burgeoning markets of the eastern suburbs.<sup>39</sup>

The highway department clearly supported the plan for extending Highway 225 into the city, but remained hesitant to add to its program of work until more funds could be secured and once again delayed designation.<sup>40</sup> In yet another appearance before the commission in 1969, local officials used the amount of work and resources local entities had put into preparing the ground for the road as a justification for state aid. Harris County Judge Bill Elliot pointed out that the city, county, and Harris County Navigation District had already spent “some \$7 million for construction of connecting roads” and the elimination of at-grade railroad crossings. Officials forecasted that the right-of-way costs for the extension would be approximately \$16 million and warned that if the commission did not act quickly the cost would skyrocket due to speculation along the routes.<sup>41</sup> The commitment of city and county officials to the extension project paid off when the Texas Highway Commission made the 225 extension a part of state highway system in April of

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<sup>39</sup> Minutes of the Highway Committee of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, October 2, 1963, Box 20, Folder 18, Foley’s Department Store Collection 03/2007-004, SCLUH, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from DeWitt C. Greer, State Highway Engineer, to Bob Casey, US Representative, July 29, 1965, Box 2002/101-72, Folder “Harris County Re: State Highway 225,” TSA. Greer asserts the THD’s commitment to Highway 225, but points to an earlier commitment of resources to NASA-area roads as a priority.

<sup>41</sup> Texas Highway Commission Public Hearing Docket, March 6, 1969, Box 2002/101-35, Folder “Harris County, Re: Highway Matters in the Houston Area,” TSA, 44.



1969.<sup>42</sup> The state highway department projected the cost of the highway at approximately \$40 million for right-of-way and construction. Not measured in this cost, however, were the changes residents believed such a road would bring to their lives.<sup>43</sup>

### **PUSHING BACK THE INEVITABLE: THE FIRST PHASE OF FREEWAY OPPOSITION**

When the State Highway Commission brought the Harrisburg Freeway extension into the State Highway Plan, opposition to the roadway began in earnest. Led by ethnic Mexican residents of Magnolia Park and Harrisburg, these critiques attacked the road from several angles—condemning the lack of input secured from residents, arguing that any roadway would drastically damage the environment and character of their neighborhood, and asserting that the roadway was not the best form of transportation for the neighborhood or the city. While in the early stages it seemed the anti-freeway group faced a doomed battle against a long-planned project, during the debate members received boosts from changes in federal policy that helped residents slow the road building process considerably.

In response to both the national environmental movement and a growing number of protests against urban highway projects, the federal government altered many of the oversight requirements on major public works projects between 1962 and 1970. Most crucial for the purposes of the Harrisburg Freeway fight, in 1969 Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act. Likewise important was the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) institution of rules that required local agencies to present more opportunities for citizen feedback through public meetings. Finally, because of ongoing

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<sup>42</sup> Minutes of the Texas Highway Commission, Minute Order 62158, April 2, 1969, Box 1998/069-5, TSA.

<sup>43</sup> State cost estimates, Letter from W.E. Carmichael, Texas State Highway District 12 Engineer, to Clara Bewie, Secretary State Highway Commission, February 26, 1969, Box 2002/101-35, Folder “Harris County, Re: Highway Matters in the Houston Area,” TSA.

resistance to controversial sections of the Interstate Highway System, the federal government decided to back away from contentious road projects.<sup>44</sup>

The National Environmental Policy Act required that the agencies responsible for projects receiving federal funding produce an environmental impact statement for approval by federal administrators. The statement, based on studies of the project area, estimated the negative consequences a project would have on the environment, economy, and residents of its covered area. The law gave the Environmental Protection Agency, which began operation in 1970, the power to reject or require changes to submitted plans that were deemed to have an overly negative outcome for project areas. The new FHWA standards established a much more democratic public hearing process specifically for roadway projects that received federal monies. Finally, the lack of US Department of Transportation and FHWA support for divisive highway projects made it difficult for state and local officials to push road projects through opposition.<sup>45</sup> The Harrisburg Freeway was the first major roadway in Houston to face this new federal scrutiny. Unlike earlier projects where public meetings served as little more than a formal rubber stamp, the elongated feedback processes slowed the momentum for highway projects and provided citizens with an additional outlet for critique.<sup>46</sup> East Houston residents who

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<sup>44</sup> Altshuler and Lubberhoff, *Mega-Projects*, 251-254.

<sup>45</sup> Mohl, "The Interstates and the Cities." Mohl argues that in order to assure the completion of the majority of the interstate system Secretaries Alan Boyd and John Volpe began to transition federal dollars and influence away from controversial projects. While the Harrisburg Freeway is not a part of the Interstate System, I argue that the waning support of divisive projects at the federal level influenced decisions on local highways as well, even if they received little federal funding.

<sup>46</sup> Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 200, discusses the role of National Environmental Protection Act in the Harrisburg fight. See also, Jeremy Korr, "Physical and Social Construction of the Capital Beltway," in Thomas Zeller and Christof Mauch ed. *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 196. For other examples of how new federal laws affected the highway revolt see Christopher W. Wells, "From Freeway to Parkway: Federal Law, Grassroots Environmental Protest, and the Evolving Design of Interstate-35E in Saint Paul, Minnesota" *Journal of Planning History* 11 (1) (2012): 8-26; See also, Joshua Cannon, "Huntsville, the Highway, and Urban Redevelopment: The Long Road to Connect Downtown Huntsville, Alabama to the Interstate Highway System," *Journal of Planning History* 11 (1) (2012): 27-46. General sources on the

opposed the highway used these new requirements to voice disapproval of the road to officials who earlier ignored them.

Significantly, not all residents of east Houston saw the roadway as a negative, but regardless of their stance toward the road itself, throughout the debate nearly all residents supported changes that allowed for more democratic decision-making. Many, including the business-oriented neighborhood group the East End Progress Association, argued that a road would help develop east Houston. In addition, many white residents who lived in neighborhoods that would not be bisected by the highway supported the construction.<sup>47</sup> In the early stages of the debate city and state officials who wanted to maintain control of development responded to this challenge by alternately trying to circumvent, appease, encourage, or ignore the concerns and thoughts of residents. From 1970 to 1974, the peak of the Harrisburg debate, both residents who opposed the road and local officials who backed it attempted to gain the upper hand.

In a series of articles published in the early months of 1970, Harrisburg resident and ethnic Mexican community journalist Maggie Landron laid out her case, and that of many of her fellow East Enders, against the Harrisburg Freeway. At a time when debates about mass transit were gaining steam across the nation, she accused local and state officials of tunnel vision when it came to building highways instead of mass transit.<sup>48</sup>

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National Environmental Protection Act include Richard A. Liroff, *National Policy for the Environment: N.E.P.A. and Its Aftermath* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Lynton Caldwell, *The National Environmental Policy Act: An Agenda for the Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Ray Clark and Larry Canter, eds., *Environmental Policy and NEPA: Past, Present, and Future* (Boca Raton, Fla.: St. Lucie Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Burke et. al., "Evaluation of Residents' Attitudes and Expectations," 9; For description of business community's reaction see Burke et. al., "Attitudes, Opinions, and Expectations of Businessmen," 23. See also, Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> A variety of cities—Atlanta, San Francisco, Washington D.C., San Diego, Buffalo, and Los Angeles—were considering or already constructing mass transit systems by this point and federal funding through the Urban Mass Transit Administration reached its peak in the early 1970s with the opening of the Highway Trust Fund for mass transit projects. See Konrad, *Transporting Atlanta*, 52-56; Richmond, *Transport of Delight*, 149-213; Zachary Scharg, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro*

Landron argued that while officials touted the newest highway plans as the “end to all our traffic problems,” they ignored the fact that new “freeways are out-of-date before they are finished.” Landron asserted that “no freeway has solved the traffic problems of Houston,” and that the “proposed Harrisburg Freeway will be no exception.” Pivoting from here, Landron articulated an alternative vision of mobility, one that she believed expressed the desire of most of east Houston ethnic Mexican residents. Instead of trying to force east Houston into a suburban model of mobility, Landron advocated for an investment in mass transit. Roads, she pointed out, could not serve a community where at least half the residents were either “without cars completely; have ancient, undependable cars that would gladly be gotten rid of; or are too elderly to drive.” Labeling highway plans short-sighted, she argued that a mass transit system would be “transportation for residents within the city for fifty and seventy-five years from now, not just tomorrow.” Cognizant of the challenge of breaking Houston’s highway monopoly, Landron called on residents to demand the implementation of mass transit and to articulate their own ideas of the politics of mobility. “It is up to you to make the city use their head,” she said. With this call to action, Landron vocalized the intention of an active constituency of central city residents to enter into the planning process of the city.<sup>49</sup>

Landron’s articles, published in the Harrisburg community newspaper *Papel Chicano*, served as the public voice to freeway opposition in east Houston’s ethnic Mexican neighborhoods. Broadly, Landron and *Papel Chicano*, reflected the youth-led Chicano movement that was central to several civil rights campaigns in Houston during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Similar to the African American Progressive Youth

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(Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 32-195; Louise Nelson Dyble, *Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, and the Golden Gate Bridge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 125-148.

<sup>49</sup> The quotes of this paragraph all come from Maggie Landron, “The Freeway to End All Freeways” *Papel Chicano*, March 12, 1970, HMRC, 6.

Association, Chicano-identified groups such as the Mexican American Youth Association represented a mainly younger subset of ethnic Mexican Houstonians unsatisfied with the actions of mainline ethnic Mexican organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens. These activists led the push for ethnic Mexicans to be identified as a racial group separate from whites and to celebrate that heritage. They also employed much more confrontational strategies of protest including the organization of Huelga (Spanish for strike) schools during protests against the Houston Independent School District's desegregation practices. The fact that Landron and *Papel Chicano* covered and participated in the Harrisburg freeway showed that worries about the shape of the community and access to political power were concerns that many generations of ethnic Mexicans shared.<sup>50</sup>

While other activists like Richard Holgin and John Reyes brought the struggle to the halls of the city and state government, Landron articulated the motivations of their opposition. Harkening back to the industrial and pollution problems east Houston had faced for decades, she asserted that ethnic Mexican residents were “fed up choking on our own exhaust fumes; fed up looking at cement ribbons crisscrossing our cities; fed up with homes and people being destroyed to build more and more freeways; and fed up with others determining what is good for us.”<sup>51</sup> Landron's words acted as a rallying cry for many in east Houston. Her articles in *Papel Chicano* spurred residents to action and redoubled efforts to drum up support from those not yet engaged. Activists strove to learn from their community's damaging experiences with infrastructure projects and pollution. They also advocated their own ideas about the neighborhoods and of the city's mobility.

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<sup>50</sup> A number of studies consider the role of Chicano activists in Houston, see de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*; Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly*; San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*; Maximilian Krochmal, “Labor, Civil Rights, and the Struggle for Democracy in Mid-Twentieth Century Texas,” (Ph.D., Duke University, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Maggie Landron, “Freeway Kills—City Thinks” *Papel Chicano*, April 11, 1970, HMRC, 7.

In March 1970, ethnic Mexican activists first broached their resistance to the highway by attending a public meeting, one required by the new FHWA meeting guidelines. At the meeting, highway department engineer A.C. Kyser revealed three potential corridors—A, B, and C—for the Harrisburg extension, each of which ran through a different part of east Houston and threatened the homes and businesses of residents (Figure 3.2). Kyser said that the department believed Corridor A, which would run between Canal Street and Harrisburg, represented the best potential route. The official count recorded that this path would require the destruction of 1,125 homes. The highway department concluded that this loss represented a lesser cost than the other two proposed corridors because it would not threaten any businesses along the ship channel. Corridor C would displace 330 homes and 70 businesses, whereas Corridor B would remove 775 homes and 110 businesses. While Kyser noted that Corridor A was the odds on favorite, he refused to name any specific route information, instead offering assurances that resident removal remained at least “three or four years” away. According to newspaper accounts, 500 people attended the meeting, most concerned that their homes would be taken by the highway.<sup>52</sup>

Opposition activists possessed a very different memory of this meeting. Holgin recalled the overarching message as an assertion that “this thing was going to go through whether you [residents] like it or not. It’s already set.” In his eyes, the department’s stance toward residents at the meeting was “you just got to get out of the way, we’re going to do this.”<sup>53</sup> Holgin and others disliked what they saw as a done-deal-attitude by asserting that, in the opinion of many residents, “no freeway was desirable.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Residents on Right-of-Way Safe for 3-4 Years,” *Houston Post*, March 10, 1970, H-Freeways-1970s. HMRC.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Madera, et. al., *The Barrios: Mexican-Americans in Houston* (Houston, Texas: Magnolia Business Center, a Model Cities Agency, January 1971), 38-39.

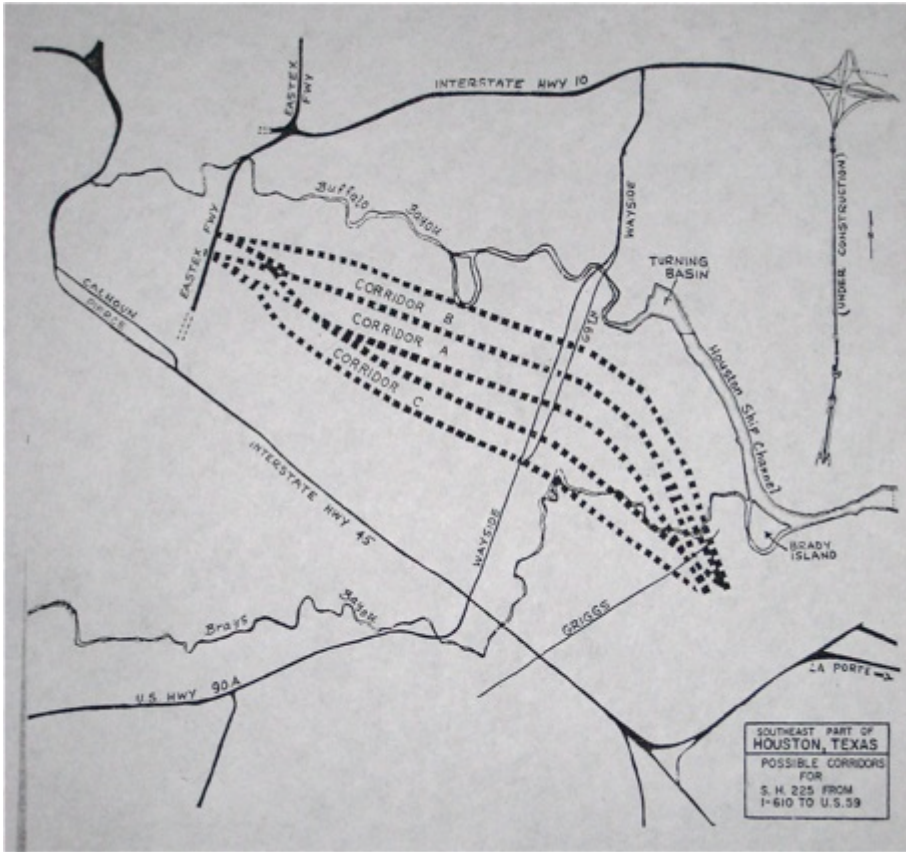


Figure 3.2: Harrisburg Freeway Alternatives

Three proposed corridors for the Harrisburg Freeway extension presented by the THD at the March 1970 meeting. “Residents on Right-of-Way Safe for 3-4 years,” *Houston Post*, March 10, 1970.

Holgin believed that the dismissive attitude of officials at the first meeting helped to galvanize opposition. At future public forums, opponents offered much stiffer resistance to the assertions of the highway officials. According to Holgin, officials facing tough audience inquiries at these meetings avoided providing answers by concluding their discussions in a rushed manner and departing without taking questions.<sup>55</sup>

In May 1970, to raise further awareness of the highway department plans and to encourage greater resistance, Holgin organized a meeting at the Ripley House, a

<sup>55</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

community center in the Second Ward.<sup>56</sup> At the meeting Holgin and Al Davey, a consulting planner who agreed to work with the residents on their fight against the road, presented a slide show of community homes and businesses that would be destroyed by the proposed highway if the Corridor A plan was constructed. They also proposed the idea of routing the highway along the Ship Channel rather than through the neighborhood itself (Figure 3.3). Holgin recalled that the slide show was particularly effective. It “really woke them [residents] up.” It alerted them to the reality that “all this stuff [was] going to be gone. All these homes and businesses are going to be gone.” Holgin recalled that opposition leaders channeled the momentum of this meeting into greater organization against the highway. He encouraged attendees to come to future meetings, write to officials, and ask questions of the Texas Highway Department.<sup>57</sup>

If this meeting functioned to coalesce opposition to the highway, it also elicited a strong response from highway department officials and other city leaders who hoped to head off such resistance before it could stymie the highway plans. In a letter to Holgin written the day after the Ripley House meeting, A.C. Kyser chastised opposition leaders for what he saw as the deliberate misleading of attendees. Kyser conveyed exasperation over the fact that the “meeting obviously resulted in leaving many of the people with the impression that the bayou location was a feasible alternate and the option was whether the freeway is to be built in Corridor A or along Buffalo Bayou.” He asked Holgin to “submit the Davey scheme to a competent, qualified engineer for review,” and to limit future discussion to “pertinent matters rather than unworkable schemes proposed by

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<sup>56</sup> For more information about Ripley House and its transition to serving the East End’s ethnic Mexican population, Felix Fraga, interview by author, February 13, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording.

<sup>57</sup> See Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012. See also, Slotboom, *Houston Freeways*, 200.





Figure 3.3: Locally Preferred Alternative

The preferred Harrisburg Freeway options presented by Richard Holgin and Al Davey at the May 1970 community meeting. Routes 2,3, and 4 correspond to corridors A,B, and C, from the THD map. Route 1 is the Ship Channel route promoted most heavily by Holgin and other anti-road activists for its avoidance of residential areas. Mark Madera, et. al., *The Barrios: Mexican-Americans in Houston* (Houston, Texas: Magnolia Business Center, a Model Cities Agency, January 1971), 41.

self appointed experts.” Kyser dismissed the idea that most residents opposed the freeway by asserting that “interested citizens and the government of Houston and Harris County” solicited the freeway in the first place. He contended that the department did its utmost to “build the best facility possible with the least amount of disruption of the neighborhood.” While he acknowledged that the highway department stood ready to “listen to constructive suggestions,” he chided Holgin and other highway opponents for taking a limited view of the project and its benefit. Arguing that while “it was not surprising that some...would oppose the project,” the state needed to account for “the desires and

interests of the rest of the people of the sector and the entire community,” not just those who opposed the plans.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the hopes of A.C. Kyser and other city officials for the smooth construction of the highway, neighborhood opposition could not be easily dismissed. Responding to residents’ complaints about the lack of citizen input and potential disruptions, the state highway department delayed the initial phase of the project and in July 1970 commissioned the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team to reexamine the routing of the roadway.<sup>59</sup> In creating this group, the state highway department clearly intended to assuage the concerns of residents by articulating the “rational objectives and detailed alternatives” of the project and by promising to consider “the social, economic, and physical implications” of the road’s presence in the neighborhoods.<sup>60</sup> Despite the goal of establishing a working relationship with the communities through which the road would run, the study team did not include a single community member outside of highway department project engineer Dexter Jones, who was born in Harrisburg; nor did it have a single local political representative.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the team consisted of twelve white men, ten of whom worked for the highway department and two, a sociologist and an economist, who worked for Texas A&M—a school intimately connected to the department.<sup>62</sup> Aiming to get command of the various actors and demands involved in the freeway debate, the team began their work in the summer of 1970.

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<sup>58</sup> Letter from AC Kyser, Texas Highway Department, to Richard Holgin, May 29, 1970, ESRC.

<sup>59</sup> The creation of such study teams was a common tactic used by local, state, and federal road builders in the 1960s and 1970s to demonstrate the government’s commitment to citizens engagement, see Mohl and Rose, *Interstate*, 155-156.

<sup>60</sup> “La Porte Freeway Design Team Named,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 19, 1970.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Bullard *Dumping in Dixie*, 26 discusses the importance of having representation on decision-making panels.

<sup>62</sup> The membership of the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team included: Phil Wilson (Chairman, Engineer, Texas Highway Department (THD)); Dr. W.G. Adkins (Research Economist, Texas A&M); Forland Bundy (Bridge Field Engineer, THD); Dr. Don Davis (Sociology Professor, Texas A&M); Hilton Hagan (Public Information Specialist, THD); Robert Hays (Architect, THD); Dexter Jones (Supervising Design Engineer,

At one of the first official meetings of the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, chairman Phil Wilson told highway and Houston officials that the major goal of the team was to prevent the road planning process from becoming a full blown “controversy.” The team hoped that they were entering into the process early enough to combat the “bad feelings” that often arose as these debates dragged on. They thought that such problems could be avoided if they could “meet with everyone involved,” shore up supporters, and find “offsets to the objections of the people.”<sup>63</sup> While the team knew that numerous groups and many residents of east Houston supported the roadway, they also recognized the reality that new federal regulations made it so that “one person can stop a freeway” by raising questions through the EIS process and public hearings. In the first months of its existence, the team believed that the freeway would ultimately succeed because, with the exception of Holgin’s anti-freeway group, “all of the civic groups and virtually all of the private citizens who have contacted the team have expressed a pressing need for a freeway.” Despite this strong support, the study team intended to educate residents about the freeway plans in order to dispel the “rumors” that swirled around the freeway plans after the meetings in March and May of 1970.<sup>64</sup>

In hopes of promoting the official image of the roadway, the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team began by distributing an informational packet and offering quarterly progress reports on the freeway. The information pamphlet made the case for the freeway through the same celebratory, growth-driven language used to sell earlier highway

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THD); Irl Larrimore, Jr. (Field Engineer, THD); William McClure (Engineer, THD); George Munson (Eng., THD); Roy Rodman (Landscape Arch., THD); Oliver Stork (Eng., THD). Member roll from Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, Meeting Minutes, September 16, 1970, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC. The relationship between Texas A&M University and the Texas Highway Department is well known anecdotally and professionally. The Texas Transportation Institute, a think tank and policy center housed at A&M was created with help from the Texas Highway Department.

<sup>63</sup> Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, Meeting Minutes, September 16, 1970, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>64</sup> “Progress Report, Harrisburg Freeway Study Team,” January 8, 1971, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

projects. Published in both English and Spanish, the pamphlet told residents that building the Harrisburg Freeway would put the community on “the road to better living.” It would replace the accidents, noise, and exhaust fumes that came from crowded surface streets with better access to jobs, education, and a higher quality of life. Showing their determination to get the input of citizens, the pamphlet asked residents to share information with the team about “where you live, where you work, where you shop, where your children go to school, what church you attend, what parks you have or need” so that it could find the best location for the road.<sup>65</sup> The study team and its community survey directly resulted from the opposition of ethnic Mexican East Enders.

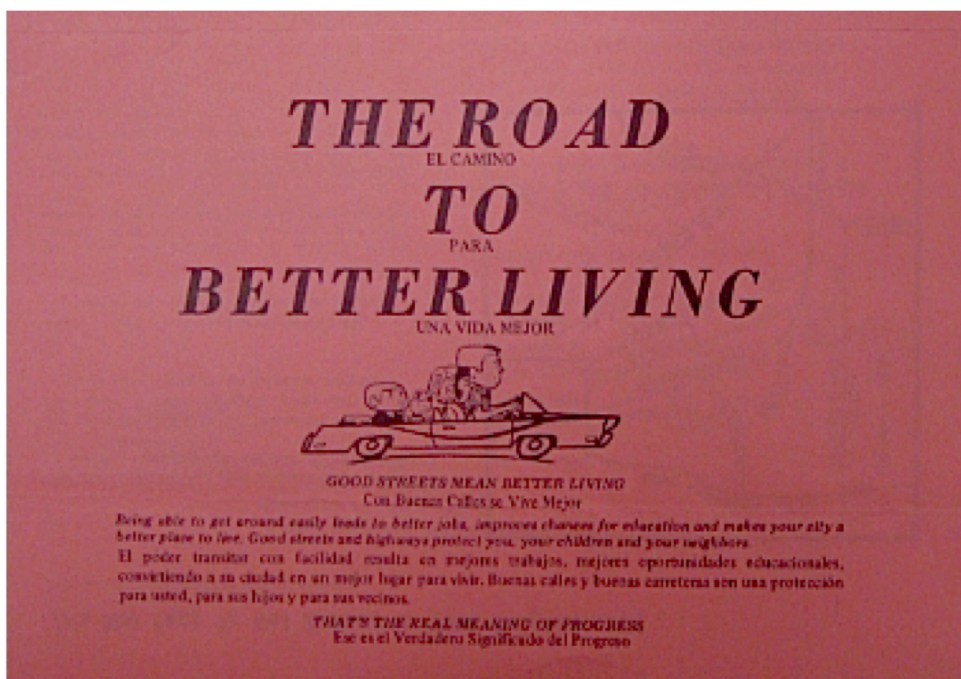


Figure 3.4: Harrisburg Freeway Study Team Newsletter

A clip from a Harrisburg Freeway Study Team newsletter attempting to sell the Harrisburg Freeway extension as a positive development for the neighborhoods through which it would run. Note the use of both Spanish and English. Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, “Handout Pamphlet,” December 1970, City of Houston Department of Planning Records, La Porte Freeway Extension File, Erik Slotboom Research Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, “Handout Pamphlet,” December 1970, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

Opposition to the roadway resulted in the delay of the project and in a study that promised to include greater citizen feedback. This must be considered a victory for anti-freeway advocates given the nature of decision-making in the city up until this point. (Figure 3.4)

#### **“HIGHWAYS ARE NO LONGER GODS”: CONTINUED FREEWAY OPPOSITION**

Building upon their earlier efforts, the Texas Highway Department and the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team wasted no time in attempting to move forward. In a move intended to assuage the demands of residents both for and against the route, government officials shifted their pitch for the project away from the “greater good,” suburb-oriented strain of the previous months and replaced it with a language that put the affected residents and their concerns at its core. At a February 1971 meeting attended by at least 600 people, the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team informed residents that the route for the freeway would be chosen by the end of the year.<sup>66</sup> A few weeks later Dexter Jones attended another information session at the Magnolia Community Center in the heart of Magnolia Park. Here, he faced a number of community activists who opposed the highway. These residents reasserted their demand that the state build no road, no matter the type, through their community. The residents told Jones that they feared “a wide ribbon of concrete will ruin their neighborhoods and scatter residents” across the city, destroying their community. Apparently tone-deaf to these concerns, Jones replied: “the freeway is necessary and it will be built. We don’t know how, where, or when, but it will be built.” Jones continued, saying that the highway department would consider the Ship Channel route, but he gave no promises. To Holgin, Jones’s assertion that the department

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<sup>66</sup> Leora Cekosky, “Freeway Panel Meets with Progress Association,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 1971.

was considering the Ship Channel struck a false note and seemed simply to be the department's way of trying to "pacify people."<sup>67</sup>

These two meetings signaled that the debate around the Harrisburg Freeway extension was far from over. Undeterred and unwilling to abandon ten years of planning and expense, officials took new steps to try to secure the project's start. In January 1973, the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team announced its conclusion that Corridor A, the route through the heart of Harrisburg and Magnolia Park, represented the best route for the roadway.<sup>68</sup> The highway department accepted the study team's conclusion and having held the required public meetings, settled the route. Initial construction was still years away and many residents continued to vocally object to the highway. After the route was decided upon, the terrain of the debate shifted once again, centering this time on the definition of the communities through which the road would run.

In the early 1970s, the Texas Highway Department released the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Harrisburg extension and the Neighborhood Improvement Program of the Houston Department of Planning released their plan for Magnolia Park. The reports placed the character of East End neighborhoods at the centers and pushed a debate about the future of the area to the fore of the freeway debate. In their depictions of Magnolia Park, the Second Ward, and Harrisburg, the reports provided evidence for readers looking either for justification to build or reasons to repudiate the freeway and each were fraught with political agendas of their own. On one hand, both reports highlighted the institutionalized problems and underserved populations of the East End, seemingly corroborating residents' complaints that their neighborhoods struggled

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<sup>67</sup> "Highway Department Standing Behind Plans for Harrisburg Freeway," *Houston Chronicle*, February 21, 1971.

<sup>68</sup> Tom Steacy, "Highway Dept. Tells Tentative Route of Harrisburg Freeway" *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1973.

due to underinvestment from the city and problems caused by the concentration of industry. On the other, they substantiated some of the claims of road proponents that the freeway would not greatly change residents lives and painted most of the East End as dilapidated and struggling. To freeway advocates, the problems highlighted in the reports legitimated the proposed destruction of a section of these neighborhoods in order to make way for the freeway. To opponents, the reports misrepresented their communities. Residents asserted that far from neglected, their neighborhoods were vital and functional. While acknowledging that the East End had problems, residents argued that finding solutions to those problems simply required an increase in resources, not wholesale destruction. This clash over how to perceive and improve the East End would dominate the remainder of the debate around the Harrisburg Freeway extension. The two reports held the spotlight with both sides exerting a great deal of effort to bend the reports to meet their ends.

Supported by Model Cities funding, Houston's Neighborhood Improvement Program aimed at bettering the lives of the poorest residents of the city by upgrading their homes and neighborhoods. The program began in the early 1970s, directed by the Houston Department of Planning. As with the Harrisburg Freeway Study Team, in order to create plans of work, the department conducted neighborhood surveys to solicit residents' opinions about the problems they faced. The Magnolia Park survey reported issues with poor drainage, too few streetlights, and a lack of park space. The pending highway loomed over the Magnolia Park plan of work and became one of the major issues the program attempted to address. Highway officials wrote the EIS in order to satisfy the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act. The document detailed all of the plans for the Harrisburg Freeway and demonstrated how officials viewed the communities around the proposed road. Both reports highlighted the

arguments that activists and officials used in their attempts to influence the outcome of the debate and shed light onto the ways that the potential highway influenced the shape and meaning of the communities through which it would run.

In their delineation of the boundaries of east Houston, both the Neighborhood Improvement Program's plan of work and the EIS demonstrated how the proposed freeway might alter the definition of the neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Improvement Program defined Magnolia Park using one natural boundary, Brays Bayou, two man-made, the Ship Channel and the Houston Belt & Terminal railroad tracks, and one imagined, the proposed Harrisburg Freeway.<sup>69</sup> The EIS acknowledged all the same boundaries and asserted that because of these pre-existing borders the roadway's route would not cause "any division or disruption of established communities."<sup>70</sup> Even as ink, then, the route that highway officials drew on official maps restructured the communities and landscapes through which it ran.

The two reports captured the contradictory understandings road proponents and opponents held of east Houston. When highway and development proponents looked at east Houston communities they saw, just as they did with the Third and Fifth Wards, ample chunks of land covered by decrepit or abandoned structures.<sup>71</sup> When east Houston residents looked, they saw their homes. Maggie Landron once again articulated the viewpoint of many ethnic Mexican residents when she claimed in a *Papel Chicano* article that while the "second ward barrios may not mean much to the Anglos of East End or to Mayor Welch...they are home to those Chicanos living there."<sup>72</sup> These clashing

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<sup>69</sup> City of Houston Depart. of Planning, "Houston's Neighborhood Improvement Planning Program: Magnolia Park Working Plan," 2.

<sup>70</sup> FHWA; USDOT; THD, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement for State Highway 225," 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Maggie Landron, "Harrisburg Freeway Will Destroy Barrio," *Papel Chicano*, February 20, 1970, HMRC, 3.



conceptions of the same landscape and of the potential changes the freeway could bring show how the debate surrounding it quickly became about the future shape of east Houston.

Given that its mission was to find ways to improve the neighborhood it studied, the Neighborhood Improvement Program's findings corroborated the community's perceptions of their neighborhoods and diverged from the picture of the East End projected by the highway department's rhetoric. The report stated that 72 percent of homes in Magnolia Park were either in excellent condition or needed only minor repairs. Of the remaining 28 percent, only 27 percent required some form of major repair, and just 1 percent were listed as completely unsound.<sup>73</sup> Given that Magnolia Park, as a stable ethnic Mexican, working-class community, was representative of the neighborhoods that surrounded it, it can be assumed that similar conditions existed in those communities.

Despite the study's conclusion that Magnolia Park and its surrounding communities were far from decrepit, highway officials continued to argue that the road was needed to revitalize a downtrodden neighborhood. In the EIS, officials asserted that the route they chose would "enable the parks, playgrounds, historic sites, churches and other community facilities to be utilized more fully."<sup>74</sup> To residents whose homes stood alongside the proposed route, who worked in one of the soon to be razed businesses, or worshipped at one of the two churches in the highway's path, the neighborhood was already used "fully."<sup>75</sup> Once again led by Richard Holgin, these residents would make another push against the freeway plans, gaining a substantial assist from federal regulators and a stagnating state and national economy along the way.

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<sup>73</sup> City of Houston Dept. of Planning "Houston's Neighborhood Improvement Planning Program: Magnolia Park Working Plan," 5.

<sup>74</sup> FHWA; USDOT; THD, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement for State Highway 225," 8.

<sup>75</sup> "HGAC okays building Harrisburg Freeway," *Houston Chronicle* August 21, 1973; Frank Partida, interview by author, March 5, 2013.

While the Neighborhood Improvement Program's conclusions were encouraging for highway proponents, the federal oversight involved with the EIS made the document the most significant remaining opportunity to slow the freeway's construction. Aware that the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act made it harder to get projects approved, Richard Holgin moved to make the regulations work in their favor. Holgin knew that the EIS would face federal scrutiny and planned to jump on any errors federal regulators highlighted. Holgin linked the Harrisburg fight to freeway revolts taking place across the country. Pointing to the contemporary North Expressway fight in San Antonio and those in Boston, Miami, Baltimore and San Francisco, Holgin announced at a public meeting that the national mood toward highways had shifted and that citizen resistance efforts across the nation meant that "highways are no longer gods."<sup>76</sup>

The Environmental Protection Agency's rejection of the Harrisburg Freeway EIS in September 1973, gave anti-freeway activists their best chance to stop the road.<sup>77</sup> Holgin, in a speech before the City Council in October 1973, pointed out that between the release of the routing information and the EIS the displacement projections had increased considerably. The original estimate of 900 homes had increased to 1,244 in the EIS, with a final displacement of 4,000 residents.<sup>78</sup> Holgin also lambasted a comment that William Ward, a state highway engineer, made after the announcement of the inadequate ruling. In response to the ruling, Ward commented that the Texas Highway Department was not "too sure how displacing people would have an impact on the environment. We [the

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<sup>76</sup> "Route Plans Aired at Public Meeting," *Houston Chronicle*, February 19, 1973. Mohl, "The Interstates and the Cities," 198, discusses the San Antonio North Expressway fight.

<sup>77</sup> "Harrisburg Freeway Study Called Inadequate by EPA" *Houston Chronicle*, September 1, 1973.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Holgin testimony before the Houston City Council, City Council Minutes, October 9, 1973, HMRC, 37. See also, FHWA; USDOT; THD, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement for State Highway 225," 10.

highway department] tend to think along the lines of air, noise and water having an environmental impact.” In his testimony Holgin said residents of east Houston disagreed with Ward and the Texas Highway Department, they believed that “uprooting and displacing 4,000 persons will have an adverse effect on our community—as a total living organ.”<sup>79</sup> Holgin’s words illustrated that residents connected the highway fight with the very essence of their neighborhoods. His words showed that the fight against the highway was not just a conflict over whose view of the road would win out, but further, who possessed the right to interpret the value of the homes and lives residents had built in East Houston. Holgin’s words also spoke to the fact that Americans held competing ideas about the environment in the 1970s. What was once a solely scientific term was quickly encompassing political import as Americans applied it to questions about their immediate surroundings word and no longer just represented a scientific concept.

Continuing to rely on the idea that the differences between white and ethnic Mexican communities in the East End meant that the highway could run through the community without causing major disruption, city and state officials continued to support the Harrisburg project. The Harrisburg Freeway Study Team asserted that they would work closely with the EPA to address the shortcomings with the EIS.<sup>80</sup> The City Council continued to follow the advice of the planning department, which echoed the EIS in asserting that the route of the highway split two drastically divergent neighborhoods of different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic populations. The planning department explained that the natural split between the communities on the north and south sides of the proposed freeway route meant that the “logical location of a freeway” was right

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<sup>79</sup> Richard Holgin City Council testimony, October 9, 1973.

<sup>80</sup> “Harrisburg Freeway Study Team Progress Report” March 1974, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

between them.<sup>81</sup> The continued support of the freeway from highway and city authorities—despite the opposition of ethnic Mexican citizens in the Second Ward, Magnolia Park, and Harrisburg, in addition to the rejection of the EIS—showed that even when residents articulated their ideas about the politics of mobility openly and repeatedly, they remained subordinate to the planning priorities of officials into the early 1970s.

Six months after the rejection of the EIS, Richard Holgin appeared once again in front of City Council to protest highway plans. He noted that freeway plans continued apace and once more asked City Council to stop them. Mayor Fred Hofheinz and other councilmen, perhaps to deflate or at least redirect Holgin's complaints, told him that the state highway department, not the City Council, was the venue through which he needed to voice his complaints. They told Holgin that any role the Council played in routing occurred much earlier in the process and that any future problems would be handled by the state.<sup>82</sup> In a memo he sent to City Council the day after Holgin's final appearance there, Roscoe Jones, the director of the Houston Planning Department, recounted the history of the development of Highway 225 and his department's ongoing support for the project. Jones, echoing state highway officials, pointed out that in all such projects "some objections...will be voiced," but that such resistance should not discount the "considerable public funds and planning efforts" that had already gone into the project or displace the needs of the city as a whole.<sup>83</sup> Holgin received a copy of this letter and responded to Mayor Hofheinz. A frustrated Holgin wrote: "it is clear to us that you, as well as your departments, are in favor of building this freeway through our community."

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<sup>81</sup> Dan Davis, City of Houston Department of Planning, "A few comments on the location of the Harrisburg Freeway," November 28, 1973, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

<sup>82</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, May 21, 1974, Houston City Secretary's Office.

<sup>83</sup> Memo from Roscoe Jones to Fred Hofheinz, May 22, 1974, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC.

In his sign off he told Hofheinz that he would no longer look to the city for support now that he knew “what to expect from the Hofheinz Freeway Administration.”<sup>84</sup>

**“THE LINE IS STILL THERE”<sup>85</sup>: THE END OF THE HARRISBURG FIGHT?**

At the end of 1974 it appeared that the Harrisburg Freeway would be built, despite years of protest from the ethnic Mexican residents of east Houston. The route still enjoyed the support of the Texas Highway Department, the Houston City Council, and the majority of white citizens in east Houston. The first stages of construction at the west end of Highway 225 resulted in the building of a cloverleaf to connect 225 with the extension and the clearing of several acres of land on the right-of-way through the East End. However, by 1976, larger economic forces entered into the decision-making process, which ultimately served as the tipping point for the abandonment of the route. Because of a stagnating state and national economy in the mid-1970s, the amount of federal and state funds available for road construction fell dramatically short of the demand and need for new roads. When the Texas State Highway Commission decided to mothball several projects in 1976 in order to focus on those of the highest priority, the Harrisburg Freeway was among those placed on the backburner.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the indefinite delay caused by the funding crisis, the Harrisburg Freeway did not disappear. In the late 1970s, Texas State Representative Ben Reyes, who represented much of east Houston, wrote to the state highway officials because of continued questions from constituents about the status of the road. Reyes and his aides expressed doubts to highway engineer William Ward about the wisdom of continuing

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<sup>84</sup> Letter from Richard Holgin to Mayor Fred Hofheinz, July 5, 1974, LPFE, CHPD, ESRC. It is not clear how Holgin received a copy of this memo, it may have been sent to him by Jones or obtained by other means.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> “Plan asks drastic highway cuts here,” *Houston Chronicle* August 13, 1976.

with the highway plan. By Reyes's count, the number of houses that would be removed along the route of the highway was 2200, almost a thousand more than the EIS estimated.<sup>87</sup> Reyes worried that removing that number of homes would magnify overcrowding issues and raise rents on Houstonians from the lowest socio-economic echelon. Reyes and his staff argued that when one took the "cost of replacement housing, the cost of right of way, the city's investment in capital facilities and the pressure on the housing market" into consideration, the project was unviable. Reyes asked the city planning commission and the highway department to remove the road from the Major Thoroughfare and Freeway plan.<sup>88</sup> Reyes may have employed a very different rhetoric than Holgin, but the gist remained: East Enders did not want the road.

The financial crunch of the mid-1970s, and the continued questioning of the project by elected officials like Reyes, was the death knell for the Harrisburg Freeway. While state highway and city planners turned their attention toward other routes and needs, the project did not to completely disappear. Richard Holgin remembers occasionally checking up on its position through local representatives. In one such check-in in the early 1980s, Lauro Cruz, a three-term state representative, reported back to Holgin that "the line" remained on State Highway Department maps. Holgin also continued to seek definitive answers about the road from highway officials, asking why it had not been "done away with?" The only answer he remembers receiving in response was "well, it's on hold."<sup>89</sup> In fact, as late as 1989, regional planning maps listed the Harrisburg Freeway, and its provisional Corridor A route as a site of potential future construction. It was not until 1992 that the route was finally excised from all local,

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<sup>87</sup> Letter from John Castillo to CJ Stewart, City Planning Commission, May 5, 1976. Ben T. Reyes Collection, Box 4, Folder 2, MSS 103, HMRC.

<sup>88</sup> Castillo to Stewart, May 5, 1976.

<sup>89</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

regional, and state highway plans.<sup>90</sup> Even its erasure from plans has not meant that community members have forgotten the threat of its construction. Holgin, who left Houston around 2000, recalled returning to visit with friends and former neighbors in the East End. As they caught up, Holgin recalled that “always, behind their mind, they used to ask ‘when are we having that freeway?’...they did not want that freeway to come through there.”<sup>91</sup>

Ultimately, the combination of the opposition from Holgin and his neighbors, federal regulations, and the financial crises of roadway funding did in the Harrisburg Freeway. But regulation and financing issues represented ongoing problems of large construction projects. The unique variable in this equation, then, was the opposition from east Houston ethnic Mexican communities.<sup>92</sup> Without their prolonged opposition, the road most likely would have been started well before the funding crises came to pass. By asserting their desire to control the image and definition of their neighborhoods, anti-freeway activists pushed against the established power structure of Houston and Texas. In the end, their view won out. While a victory of this type seemed unlikely when the fight began in the late 1960s, as the debate progressed into the 1970s, the previously marginalized residents of east Houston began to flex more political muscle than ever before, demanding that their ideas of the politics of mobility be taken into account.

Houstonians displayed this new political power on the ground in the projects that came to their neighborhoods and in city-wide politics. As residents, community groups, and ethnic Mexican elected officials gained a larger say in the shaping and planning of their communities, they also called for a wider role in directing the growth of the city.

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<sup>90</sup> See the Houston Galveston Regional Transportation Study, “Status of Freeway and Expressway System Map, 1989,” Map R-818, TXR MC B3, HMRC.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Holgin, interview by author, February 22, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Altshuler and Luberhoff, *Mega-Projects*, 251-254.

Here, Houston's transportation choices rose to the fore. As citizens from across the city and its environs clamored for better, faster, smoother transportation into and out of the city, residents of central Houston, ignored through most of the postwar period, built upon the Harrisburg Freeway opposition and made their voices and votes heard with more authority than ever before in the early 1970s. It is to those voices, and the mobility debates in which they rose in volume, to which we turn to in Chapter Four.



**SECTION II:  
TRANSIT DEBATES**

## **Chapter Four** **“Frankenstein” or Savior?** **Houston’s 1973 Transit Debate**

On October 7, 1973, Houstonians awoke to find their fast-growing city at a political standstill. The day before, HMA voters rejected a referendum that would have established the city’s first publically run regional transit authority, the Houston Area Rapid Transit Authority (HARTA). Intended to address problems of metropolitan congestion and alleviate concerns about the environmental impact of automobiles, the proposal and Houstonians’ perspectives on the plan, wove metropolitan politics and transportation decision-making together with unexpected results. During the lead up to the referendum, city officials, elite white Houstonians, and the Chamber of Commerce all promoted the Authority and most white residents of the city itself supported HARTA’s creation. In past decisions such a collection of backers nearly guaranteed a proposal’s passage.

In the HARTA campaign, however, a unique coalition of African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and white, mostly working-class suburbanites, opposed the plan and helped bring about its defeat. While these Houstonians disapproved of the HARTA proposal for a variety of reasons, by coming together as a bloc this group challenged several historical assumptions about the suburb-city relationship and that between white and non-white metropolitan residents during the 1970s.

The ties between the members of this coalition were tenuous. The coalition was never formalized, nor did the Houstonians within it vote alongside each other in political debates beyond transportation. Further, the groups involved were not monolithic or naturally disposed to an alliance with the others. Working-class white suburbanites offered different opinions on transit than their wealthier neighbors in other suburban

municipalities. African American and ethnic Mexicans, despite a recent history of cooperation during statewide campaigns for labor rights in the 1960s, did not have an innate connection. These groups came from different parts of the city and HMA, had different political agendas, and brought different experiences to their involvement with the HARTA debate.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these differences, the HARTA proposal, and transportation issues in general, offered this surprising constituency a space in which they could claim a concrete say over the direction of the HMA's development. Earlier chapters have documented the ways Houstonians used protests about highway planning and construction to challenge the decision-making power of elected officials and developers and to push for more democratic planning practices. Houstonians saw that call for greater power realized in the HARTA debate as, for the first time, they were presented with a choice to approve or reject a transportation plan through a direct referendum. The decisions residents made with their vote demonstrated more than an opinion about a mode of transportation. They also signaled a continued demand for citizen input in HMA governance.

One would assume that Houston's working-class blacks and ethnic Mexicans would have supported HARTA, especially considering that many relied on transit for their daily mobility. However, these Houstonians defied such expectations by rejecting mass transit. Crucially, individuals from both groups voted this way not because they disliked the idea of transit or because they wanted more highways to be built. Instead, they voted against HARTA because they felt that the proposal still reflected an official-driven planning process that discriminated against them. Based on their experiences with the building of highways, many worried that at best the system would not serve their

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<sup>1</sup> For work on black-brown coalitions and their impact on Texas politics see Maximilian Krochmal, "Labor, Civil Rights, and the Struggle for Democracy in Mid-Twentieth Century Texas," (Ph.D., Duke University, 2011).

needs and at worst it would once again damage their communities. They exercised the political power they had gained through earlier fights and rejected a proposal that did not match their expectations.

Working-class white suburbanites, on the other hand, by voting against HARTA played their expected role within historical narratives of 1970s suburb-city antagonism. Blue-collar suburbs overwhelmingly voted against the plan and were joined by some wealthier white-collar suburbs concerned that the plan would not serve their areas. The only suburbs to show support for HARTA lay to the north of Houston in areas that would be served by the proposed transit lines. Residents who opposed the system worried that if they approved a countywide authority they would be stuck footing the tax bill. In addition, suburbanites from across the HMA resented the fact that under the HARTA plan the city of Houston would have complete control of the Authority. Suburban elected officials already disliked the power Houston officials exerted through the city's expansive annexation rights and they did not want to create another system that Houston could use as a cudgel in metropolitan debates. White residents in the working-class municipalities southeast of downtown, such as Pasadena and La Porte, shared with black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians a worry that the system would not serve their needs. Finally, many of the Houstonians who voted against HARTA disliked the eminent domain powers given to the agency and their lack of oversight on the appointed board, both concerns that meshed well with Houstonians demands for greater citizen input.

The HARTA vote occurred at a time of immense political, developmental, and economic transition in Houston and the wider Sunbelt. While on its face the debate revolved around transportation, it also reflected fundamental questions about community participation and the balance of political power in the city. During the early 1970s African American, ethnic Mexican, and white Houstonians all pushed for greater

influence over local decisions. These changes were especially turbulent in Southern cities still grappling with the aftereffects of the Civil Rights Movement. African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians gained traction at the state-level in 1972 when the Texas Legislature transitioned to single-member districts, a change that, in combination with the provisions of the Voting Rights Act, created several African American and ethnic Mexican state house districts and one U.S. Congressional District in Houston.<sup>2</sup> Due to this shift, the 1973 HARTA vote marked one of the first times that African American and ethnic Mexican voters in Houston could bring direct political pressure onto local decisions through their elected state representatives. The city's minority communities helped elect five state representatives to the Texas Legislature in the fall of 1972—Mickey Leland, Anthony Hall, Senfronia Thompson, Craig Washington, and Ben Reyes. When, with less than a month to go before the HARTA election, the five legislators came out against the Authority, it seriously crippled the referendum's chances. The playing out of the HARTA debate illustrates an important example of how black, ethnic Mexican, and white Americans negotiated political decisions amidst the rapidly changing political atmosphere of 1970s Sunbelt cities.

The HARTA debate also gave Houstonians an opportunity to embrace, even if on a limited scale, a non-road centric transportation practice for the first time since 1940. In the early 1970s, cities across the Sunbelt including Houston, Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles all considered implementing mass transit systems. The decade was key developmentally for these cities. Having absorbed the population growth of the postwar period by expanding outward from historical downtowns along highways, elected officials in these cities now confronted problems with the roads that ranged from air and

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Ellen Curtin, "Reaching for Power: Barbara C. Jordan and Liberals in the Texas Legislature, 1966-1972" *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 108 (2)(Oct. 2004): 210-231.

noise pollution to growing citizen resistance to new projects. The most crippling issues, though, were traffic congestion and an inability to provide adequate mobility to suburban residents. To address these problems cities either tried to build their way out of congestion with more and larger highways, or embraced mass transit in the hope that it might promote new development patterns and ease traffic. These debates, and the choices made between mass transit and highways, have often been framed as contests between suburbs and cities. Houston's HARTA example shows, though, that these decisions often went beyond these binaries.

The early 1970s were also a pivotal economic moment for Sunbelt cities and the nation as a whole. In late 1973, just days after the HARTA vote, the Oil Crisis began, compounding an already stagnating national economy and contributing to the start of a nearly decade-long recession. Compared to midwestern and northeastern cities hit hard by deindustrialization and the recession, Sunbelt cities fared relatively well during the decade, bestowed with the moniker of Sunbelt as a foil to the struggling midwestern Rustbelt.<sup>3</sup> Sunbelt cities saw an increase of migrants during the 1970s, as many Americans moved south and west in search of work. Houston provides a particularly crucial example because of the city's centrality to the national and international petroleum industry. High oil prices allowed Houston to ride through the national recession on a wave of growth, with the oil industry and secondary suppliers providing a wealth of job opportunities throughout the HMA.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the HARTA debate raised two issues about taxation. The blue-collar and white-collar suburbanites who resisted HARTA found part of their motivation in their

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton Studies in American Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Plaut, "Energy and the Texas Economy: Past Present and Future," (Austin: University of Texas, Bureau of Business Research, 1982), 203; Joe Feagin, "The Global Context of Metropolitan Growth: Houston and the Oil Industry," *The American Journal of Sociology* 9: 6 (May, 1985), 1204-1230.

disdain for the idea of financially supporting a system that only served the city. This type of tax resistance represented an early iteration of the national tax revolt that would reach its apex among America's white-dominated suburbs with the passage of Proposition 13 in California in 1978. In this vote, suburban, predominantly white municipalities removed their tax revenues from central cities like Oakland that were increasingly run by black or ethnic Mexican politicians.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that the resistance of some suburban Houstonians stemmed from a hesitance to subsidize non-white mobility, but Houston's control over the Authority and tax revenue represented an even larger problem for most suburbanites. African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians also attacked the proposed emission tax of HARTA. They argued that the tax, like many other Texas taxes, was regressive and placed a greater burden on the income of the poor than it did the rich. Each of these disputes would be central to the larger HARTA debate.

The politics of the HMA, the mobility needs of its residents, and the realities of the city's growth contributed to the surprising outcome of the 1973 vote. Like the Harrisburg Freeway fight, the HARTA vote was a linchpin moment in the city's development history. If the Harrisburg conflict marked an apex of Houstonians steady attempts to gain influence over city decisions, the HARTA vote represented the first moment that power was applied. Before the vote, the city's leaders confidently laid out the routes of the HMA's future in any direction they saw fit. After, many voices clamored to shape the area's way forward.

#### **CONSIDERING TRANSIT: CROWDED HIGHWAYS AND THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS**

During the two decades after World War II, Houston planning and elected officials worked to build the physical infrastructure for a city that "grew up with the

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<sup>5</sup> On California Proposition 13, see Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

automobile.”<sup>6</sup> As earlier chapters illustrated, officials wove the car and the structures it required into the fabric of the city’s development. What is more, they believed that personal cars and road systems would dictate the physical shape of the city into the future. Well into the 1960s, entities such as the Houston Chamber of Commerce, which considered itself one of the “prime movers for a mobile city,” continued to promote the personal automobile and the roads that carried it above all else.<sup>7</sup> The Chamber applauded the city’s highway development and viewed its expansion as critical to keeping Houston from “strangling on its own vehicular traffic.” The organization remained skeptical of public transit, doubting that any system could solve Houston’s transportation problems if even an “intensive road program” would be “hard-pressed to keep pace” with the growth of the city.<sup>8</sup> The Chamber and many other groups who supported highway construction expressed confidence that once the freeway system was completed “that freeways and buses should satisfy Houston’s mass transit needs until 1980.”<sup>9</sup>

Much of this optimism dissipated by the late 1960s, however, as Houston’s growth strained the limits of the city’s existing infrastructure system. This stress was especially visible on the city’s first generation highways. Between 1950 and 1969, vehicle registrations in Harris County more than tripled from 306,870 to 1,035,346 and showed no signs of slowing down.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that “an adequate and efficient transportation system [was] vitally important to the economy and welfare of the Houston

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<sup>6</sup> City of Houston Department of Planning, “Houston Metropolitan Area Transportation Study Report No. 3: Public Transit,” 1963, Box 5, *Houston Metropolitan Area Transportation Study Reports, 1960-1963*, CHDP, RG A 004, HMRC, ix.

<sup>7</sup> “CofC: prime mover for a mobile city,” *Houston*, July, 1963, HMRC, 47.

<sup>8</sup> “Building Freeways to the Future,” *Houston*, December 1963, 1963 Annual Report, HMRC.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> These numbers are a combination of passenger cars, trucks, and other vehicles. Houston Chamber of Commerce, “Motor Vehicle Registration in Harris County, 1950-1984,” H-Chamber of Commerce-Statistics Vertical File (VF), HMRC.



Metropolitan Area” and no longer confident that roadways would provide the answer, city and regional leaders began to search for solutions.<sup>11</sup> As the city faced worsening congestion levels in the late 1960s, despite opening more miles of highway during the decade than any that preceded it, consideration of non-road based mass transit systems picked up speed.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the increasingly dire situation on the area’s roadways, though, many Houstonians, especially suburban commuters, steadfastly advocated for the expansion of roads and resisted the idea of mass transit. These citizens often viewed highways as the pinnacle of the free-market, non-regulatory attitude so closely linked with Houston’s identity and that of Texas itself. The suggestion that individuals should give up their vehicles to ride transit or have their movements determined by the routes of a fixed system seemed to be un-Houstonian and even undemocratic. As U.C. Waigand, a resident of Brazoria County south of Houston, told Thomas Tyson, head of the city’s Public Service Department, Houstonians would choose private automobiles over transit even if the city offered “diamond-studded, fur-upholstered coaches running on gold and silver rails,” because they “have no desire to travel in herds.”<sup>13</sup>

While many leaders echoed the sentiments, if not the rhetoric, of residents like Waigand in their support of the city’s auto-centric transportation system, those tasked with preserving the city’s efficient growth and movement recognized the severity of the

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<sup>11</sup> City of Houston Department of Planning, “Metropolitan Area Transportation Study: Houston, Origin-Destination Survey, 1960,” Box 1, Folder 12, City of Houston Department of Planning Collection (CHDP), RG A 004, HMRC, 3

<sup>12</sup> In 1960 only 42 miles of the nearly 300-mile designated freeway system had been constructed. By 1969, the completed mileage had grown to 152 miles. See Houston Harris County Transportation Study Newsletter, January 1969, Box 40, Folder 3, City of Houston Public Service Department Collection (CHPSD), RG A 20, HMRC; “Swinging, Surging, Soaring, the Shining Sixties,” *Houston*, December 1969, HMRC, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from UC Waigand to Thomas Tyson, March 12, 1970, Box 44, Folder 1, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

limitations on the highway system. Even as they celebrated the personal autonomy provided by the car, leaders increasingly worried that “personal living patterns and changed economic standards and choice of mode of travel could lead to oversupply of transportation facilities of one type and critical deficiencies in other areas.”<sup>14</sup> Officials called for alternative systems that could connect diffuse parts of the city and alleviate the crippling immobility that daily occurred on the highways. This action created a flurry of debate around the HMA about what form of transit represented the best path forward. As worries about an overreliance on roads and general immobility accrued, confidence in freeways waned. For many, mass transit systems that not long before had been considered unrealistic or un-Houstonian, reemerged as “the most promising and likely solution to the most critical corridor deficiencies and to problems of access and circulation in downtown Houston.”<sup>15</sup>

As city leaders began to discuss transit options they made it clear that any such system would accompany, not replace the city’s road network. Officials recognized the integral place that roads and their users held—and would continue to hold—in the functioning of the city’s transportation system and economy. They did not want their championing of transit to alienate politically powerful road proponents such as suburban developers. In attempts to avoid creating conflict, officials couched the discussion of transit within a rhetoric of balanced investment toward a system of roads and mass transit that would create an “urban environment” that “the region as a whole [was] willing to

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<sup>14</sup> City of Houston Public Service Department, “Road And Transit Study,” July 1969, Box 38, Folder 9, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, 55.

<sup>15</sup> City of Houston Public Service Department, “Road And Transit Study,” July 1969, Box 38, Folder 9, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, 53; Several scholars have written of the value officials of major cities placed on mass transit as a way to address the issues plaguing central cities. See David W. Jones, *Mass Motorization + Mass Transit: An American History and Policy Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

support.”<sup>16</sup> Leaders acknowledged that creating this type of system required “a rare level of foresightedness and cooperation” among “both public and private segments of the regional community.”<sup>17</sup> Such cooperation, however, did not materialize in Houston.

The careful actions of city officials to prevent the discussion of transit from dividing Houstonians between those who thought it offered a viable solution to the city’s mobility issues and those who believed that only continued road construction could solve its problems. Within this debate, though, transit advocates succeeded in framing their cause as a key component of a multi-pronged assault on the city’s mobility problems. The foothold gained by this tack allowed local and state officials to lay the institutional and financial foundations that would be necessary to plan and implement a mass transportation system in Houston.

Some of the earliest ideas for Houston’s non-road mass transit, perhaps inspired by the city’s proximity to NASA, proffered mobility systems that resembled space-age wonders such as hovering trains, self-driven cars, or even “flying buses.”<sup>18</sup> City leaders entertained, or at least tolerated, the fanciful possibilities some citizens thought up, but as they set to work they approached transit options more realistically. Most plans revolved around building an improved bus system or limited rail system to alleviate traffic problems.<sup>19</sup> In order to build such a system, officials began to advocate for enabling

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<sup>16</sup> City of Houston Public Service Department, “Road And Transit Study,” July 1969, Box 38, Folder 9, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, 56.

<sup>17</sup> City of Houston Public Service Department, “Road And Transit Study,” July 1969, Box 38, Folder 9, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, 56.

<sup>18</sup> There are dozens of such plans contained within the records of the City of Houston Public Service Department Collection, HMRC, RG A 20 see particularly Box 44, 45, 46, and 47, which contain plans ranging from Monorails to “flying buses.” These plans came from both individuals and prominent companies like Westinghouse and Goodyear. For “flying buses” see Houston Public Service Department Box 47, Folder 1, HMRC.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Letter from Thomas Tyson to Louie Welch, December 19, 1969, where Tyson advocates for the construction of bus-only lanes on the Gulf Freeway, Box 43, Folder 1, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

legislation at the state level that would allow large cities to create public mass transit authorities.<sup>20</sup> At the same time that they lobbied the state, the Houston City Council discussed creating an intermodal downtown transit center that would allow for bus, automobile, and mass transit to intersect in the central business district, and make an easy connection to the city's suburban airport.<sup>21</sup>

In 1969, responding to the rising concern of urban leaders, the State of Texas created the Texas Metropolitan Transportation Commission to manage and plan state investment in public transportation. The commission aimed to “encourage, foster, and assist the development of public mass transportation, both intercity and intracity, in the state and to encourage the establishment of rapid transit.”<sup>22</sup> Despite this clear mission statement, state leaders, sensitive to the power of the highway lobby and cognizant of the level of investment in the state's roads, tempered the idea that mass transit support would ever equal or surpass that of highways. Reflecting upon the commission, Speaker of the Texas House Gus Mutscher reminded Texans that “it took a series of political decisions to create the committee” and assured his constituents that their government recognized that Texas had “one of the finest road systems in the world” and that no state mass transit legislation would prevent the government from keeping it that way.<sup>23</sup>

Despite politicians' promises that roads would continue to garner significant investment, road proponents in Houston and across Texas resisted the discussion of mass transit funding and study that was gaining steam. Eugene Maier, the longtime Director of City Planning for Houston and a staunch supporter of continued road building, attacked

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<sup>20</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, February 1, 1961, HMRC, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Houston City Council Minutes, November 19, 1969, HMRC,132; Houston City Council Minutes, April 29, 1970, HMRC.

<sup>22</sup> Texas Mass Transportation Commission Documents, Box 40, Folder 2, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>23</sup> Speech by Gus Mutscher to Texas Transportation Congress, July 17, 1970, Box 54, Folder 6, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

advocates of mass transit for what he viewed as a lack of respect toward the effort put into building America's roadways. In a speech to the Houston Chamber of Commerce in 1971, Maier lamented the fact that "as completion of man's greatest engineering achievement—the Interstate Highway System—draws near, we [planners and engineers] find no general recognition or applause for a job well done." Instead, Maier and other road advocates faced criticism from "ecologists, environmentalists, conservationists, and a growing number of average citizens." The systems these critics advocated, Maier contended, walked a thin line "between possible success and certain failure."<sup>24</sup> Other road advocates in Texas, particularly the Texas Good Roads Association—a consortium of road contractors, engineering, and construction firms—directed their opposition toward the shift of tax money toward mass transit. The association used a visit to Washington to "wine and dine members of the Texas Congressional delegation and the Texas Highway Commission" in hope of blunting efforts "to tap the highway trust fund for mass transit and to encourage a continued emphasis on road construction."<sup>25</sup>

Mayor Louie Welch countered this opposition with a speech about transit funding given in the early 1970s in which he dealt head on with the dire reality of Houston's traffic situation. Houstonians were surrounded by "one of the finest freeway systems in the nation," he declared, but the city's snarled traffic conditions made it this system into a parking lot. To Welch it was becoming increasingly clear that not even the construction of "freeways stacked upon freeways" would solve this problem.<sup>26</sup> Instead, he called for

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<sup>24</sup> The quotes in this paragraph are from a speech by Eugene Maier, "Total Urban Mobility," delivered to the Houston Chamber of Commerce, September 1, 1971, text for the speech in Box 54, Folder 1, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>25</sup> "Texans in Capital to oppose mass transit fund plan," *Houston Post*, March 19, 1972, Box 55, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>26</sup> Speech by Louie Welch, "Transit Financing: The Cities' Role," Box 53, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, no date, 1. I base the date estimation on signs visible in the document itself, such as the naming of Rapid Transit lines General Manager Stanley Gates as well as the fact that Welch is addressing the topic of

Houstonians to demand greater support for mass transit from their representatives at every level of government. He concluded by returning to a balanced rhetoric of roads and transit, though, arguing that in order to reach a comprehensive solution to the city's mobility problems "mass transit must work hand in hand with a viable freeway system."<sup>27</sup>

During his speech, Welch broached a subject that many road advocates in Texas considered sacrosanct, the federal Highway Trust Fund. With his mention of the fund, Welch tapped into an ongoing campaign of transit advocates to open the federal gas tax, which supported the Highway Trust Fund, to both road and transit projects to give local governments the power to decide where to invest their allotment of the money. Welch maintained that it was a waste that "the money must be spent for freeways, or not at all," especially given the reality that "the need for new freeway and improved freeways varie[d] from city to city."<sup>28</sup> Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach, he advocated for a more open-ended approach to the use of funds that would allow money to be spent on transit.

With this call Welch and Houston joined the national debate about the future of mass transit and freeway construction in the United States. In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration's Department of Transportation, led by Secretary John Volpe, responding partially to the demands of large cities, called for using part of the Highway Trust Fund to pay for transit projects and made more money available for rail-based mass transit systems.<sup>29</sup> The rationale behind the Administration's support of such a move stemmed

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using the federal Highway Trust Fund to pay for mass transit systems, a debate that was waged in the early 1970s at a national level.

<sup>27</sup> Speech by Louie Welch, "Transit Financing: The Cities' Role," Box 53, Folder 7, CHPSPD, RG A 20, HMRC, no date, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Alan A. Altshuler and David Luberhoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge, Mass: Brookings Institution Press; Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2003).

from a shift in national attitudes about the construction of freeways and the use of mass transit that began in the mid-1950s and escalated to its apex in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the form of freeway revolts across the nation.<sup>30</sup> Some mass transit advocates doubted that the Nixon Administration truly supported alternatives to road construction, especially since the administration placed restraints on the gas tax monies flowing to mass transit.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of the level of commitment behind the actions of Volpe and Nixon, even their nominal support of mass transit demonstrated that the subject held an important place in American consciousness and politics. Visible everywhere from the halls of Congress and to local newspapers that contemplated the fading of “America’s love affair with freeways,” mass transit debates held a central place in policy conversations of the time, and dominated politics in Houston for much of the 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

Officials in Houston viewed mass transit primarily as a salve for the city’s problems of congestion and immobility, but they also hoped that a cutting-edge system would help the city keep up with its rivals. Houston leaders commonly discussed the decisions made by other growing cities like Dallas and Atlanta. These communities, like Houston, expanded rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s and competed with one another to draw workers, businesses, and investment from across the nation. Houston officials worked to outpace their rivals and establish their city as the most desirable and fastest

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<sup>30</sup> Some American cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco began to advocate for the formation of transit authorities in the 1950s. Houston and other cities like Atlanta and Washington D.C. did not engage in serious consideration of such systems until the mid-1960s. For discussion of the transit milieu’s expansion in the postwar period, especially the role of federal involvement see Sy Adler, “The Evolution of Federal Transit Policy,” in Martin Melosi, ed., *Urban Public Policy: Historical Modes and Methods* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also the Highway Action Committee (HAC) Papers in the Leonel Castillo Papers, Box 3, Folder 6, MSS 147, HMRC. For a general discussion of the creation and importance of the gas tax and highway trust fund see Theodore Sky, *The National Road and the Difficult Path to Sustainable National Investment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 154-181.

<sup>31</sup> “Gift Horse?” *Forbes*, April 15, 1972, 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Morrison, “American love affair with freeways fades,” *Houston Post*, April 9, 1973, Box 48, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

growing in the nation. Atlanta and San Francisco garnered much of Houston's attention given the successful implementation of the Bay Area Rapid Transit and Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority systems in the cities. Prominent Houston real estate developer Gerald Hines wrote to Houston City Councilman Frank Mancuso to lament that whereas Houston had yet to take action on transit, "Atlanta is a forward thinking, forward moving city that is far ahead of Houston in implementing mass transit." Hines urged the councilman to recognize that in the future "the survival of the city is only going to be related primarily to the strength of its total transportation system."<sup>33</sup>

The balanced road-transit rhetoric of Mayor Welch and the suggestions of a "total transportation system" in Gerald Hines's letter suggested that mass transit advocates recognized that roadways, and their transit-skeptical proponents, would remain central to Houston's transportation planning. While proponents attempted to convince hesitant road supporters of transit's merits, though, they also took a series of concrete steps at the state and local level to open the way for the 1973 HARTA vote. While transit supporters successfully created a pathway toward the city's first public mass transit system, the fight that ensued prior to the HARTA vote demonstrated the intensity of disagreements about transit and roads at the local, state, and federal levels.

#### **CLEARING THE WAY FOR HARTA: THE PITCH FOR TRANSIT IN HOUSTON**

Despite resistance from road backers like Maier and the Texas Good Roads Association, federal and state money became increasingly available for transit studies and system construction. Combined with the state's growing involvement through the Texas Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the expansion of federal involvement in mass

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<sup>33</sup> Letter from Gerald Hines to Frank Mancuso, January 6, 1972, Box 53, Folder 6, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.



transit made more funds available than ever to local governments.<sup>34</sup> On the heels of the locally funded “Road and Transit Study,” the city applied to the Urban Mass Transportation Administration in 1970 for a technical study grant to create a mass transit plan for the region. They received a grant for \$516,000 in October 1970 and commissioned Alan M. Voorhees & Associates to begin work on a regional transit plan in May 1971. Ultimately, the Voorhees study cost \$774,000 and its findings were released in a series of publications between 1971 and 1973.<sup>35</sup>

With the Voorhees study underway, Houston elected officials and their predominantly white supporters began a campaign to convince residents that the Houston metropolitan area needed a local transit authority and a system that offered alternatives to the personal automobile. To sell the idea of an authority, city leaders established the Transit Action Program (TAP) in 1971. Mayor Welch appointed thirteen prominent Houstonians to the TAP’s steering committee and tasked the group with creating a system “desirable enough that we, ourselves, use it. We want a system that will be for everybody, not just a system to stop the other guy from gumming up the freeway for us.”

<sup>36</sup> The TAP and its Citizen’s Advisory Committee (CAC), which began to operate in early 1972, would bring citizen input into the planning process. Welch believed the

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<sup>34</sup> See Adler, “The Evolution of Federal Transit Policy.” Adler argues that federal involvement increased because of greater advocacy for transit solutions by central business district actors throughout the country. I think Houston’s case is slightly different because the CBD leaders in Houston controlled or influenced policy and resources well outside of the central city. Voorhees study cost in “Transit Advisers to Meet,” *Houston Post*, September 14, 1971, Box 10, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>35</sup> Tyson to Ford, May 8, 1973. The first Voorhees report was issued in June 1971 under the title “Transit Action Program: Concerns and Objectives,” Box 2, CHDP, RG A 004, HMRC. The final report titled “Transit Program for Houston: A Summary Report,” came out in March 1973, Box 2, CHDP, RG A 004, HMRC.

<sup>36</sup> All thirteen members of the TAP steering committee were wealthy men, it included the president of the University of Houston, the president of Humble Oil and Refining, and the president of American General Insurance. Eleven members of the TAP steering committee were white, one was black, and one was ethnic Mexican. Minutes of Steering Committee of the Transit Action Program May 27, 1971, Box 58, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

diversity of the CAC, which consisted of one hundred Houstonians from across “the city’s business, industrial, professional and socio-economic segments,” would help spread the transit program to a wide range of Houstonians.<sup>37</sup> The TAP and CAC put out a monthly newsletter called *Newsbriefs* and city officials pitched transit at hundreds of information sessions throughout the city. Thomas Tyson and his primary assistant, William Laughlin, attended over ninety community meetings between January of 1972 and the August 1973 when the HARTA board was created and its members became the public face of the campaign.<sup>38</sup>

TAP presentations to the City Council offered transit proponents an opportunity to build the case for HARTA. In an April 1972 meeting, Robert Keith, the head planner for the Voorhees Plan, employed Welch’s balanced investment rhetoric when he discussed the still in-progress plan. Explaining the study, Keith celebrated Houston’s “excellent highway system,” which provided an advantageous starting point for the development of a larger system. But, he argued, even the state’s effective highway department could not “build highways as fast as people are moving into Houston.” Keith asserted that in 1972 the effectiveness of city’s highways was “the best it [Houston] will ever have.” The Voorhees plan, he said, was intended to address the fact that Houston’s access to mobility in the future would, at best, stay even or decline. Time and time again Keith and other transit planners made the argument that augmenting highway capacity with transit held the most promise. As Keith moved into a discussion of the planned rapid rail system, he kept roads close to the center of the discussion. Though in his eyes mass transit was “the key element in an overall new comprehensive public transportation service,” Keith assured the Council, and through them Houstonians, that transit

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<sup>37</sup> “Transit Advisers to Meet” *Houston Post*; See also, Louie Welch’s letter to Houstonians invited to become members of the CAC, February 11, 1972, Box 48, Folder 1, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>38</sup> “Presentations—Re: Transit Program by Thomas Tyson” Box 58, Folder 8, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

proponents did not consider that “the construction of the Rapid Transit Program” meant “that the highway efforts should be diminished.”<sup>39</sup> Keith and other transit proponents hoped that depicting the transit plan as a complement to, not a competitor of, the roadways would ease its acceptance.

In addition to selling the transit plan, the TAP also worked to predict and deflect the criticisms levied at the transit plans. To divert questions about citizen input, officials lauded the TAP and the CAC as attempts to “get as much citizen involvement as possible” with the ultimate goal of creating a system “that would be responsive to the needs of the people.” Keith lauded Houstonians for their willingness to “make themselves available” and remain “positive minded about working on program like this one.” He felt that the plan, when announced, would benefit greatly from “the right kind of response and criticism” they had received from residents across the region. Transit supporters knew that some Houstonians doubted the system would serve them and their interests. By using language of inclusion, transit planners and officials tried to head off criticisms of HARTA and spin the roiling debate as a productive part of planning process.<sup>40</sup>

Non-government groups that supported transit also helped to sell the system. Beginning in 1971, groups like the Houston Chapter of the League of Women Voters began to publicly advocate for mass transit.<sup>41</sup> In a March 1971 press release, the League argued that despite the mobility highways afforded the city, the problems they caused outweighed their benefits. They listed a number of reasons the city needed to shift away from highways, arguing that the system the city possessed was “congested; it perpetuates pollution; not everyone can use it; it is becoming unsafe; it is costly; it is not always a

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<sup>39</sup> All Keith quotes from Houston City Council Minutes, April 24, 1972, 495-499.

<sup>40</sup> Keith quotes from Houston City Council Minutes, April 24, 1972, 495-499.

<sup>41</sup> Other prominent civic groups that called for mass transit included the Texas Society of Professional Engineers, see Letter W.F. Herbert to Louie Welch, June 16, 1972, Folder 2, Box 56, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

thing of beauty—and with our present system of development by land speculation, the freeway perpetuates itself.” Despite this dim outlook, the League pointed out that Houstonians were lucky because the city still had a choice to make about its future transportation networks. The choice was simple: Houstonians could “either continue to accommodate our automobiles by expansion of the present freeway systems,” and compound the issues this system created, or the city could “balance our system with rapid transit.”<sup>42</sup>

In September 1971, just as city planning director Eugene Maier levied his criticisms at transit advocates, the League of Women Voters announced that in conjunction with the Southwestern Center for Urban Research at Rice University, it would conduct a survey of citizen’s attitudes toward transit. The League hoped that the survey would confirm citizenry’s support of a transit system. Released in November 1972, the survey showed that 52 percent of Houstonians said they would use mass transit as their main means of transportation if it were available. In addition, it showed that 54 percent of respondents believed they would vote for a publicly owned and maintained system.<sup>43</sup> The summary of the survey concluded that Houstonians recognized that “freeways...and relatively limited bus system” could not address the city’s specific needs. Instead, the results justified a shift to “a comprehensive, multi-modal transit system” that could adequately address the city’s growth.<sup>44</sup>

Buoyed by the results of the survey, the support of civic groups like the League of Women Voters, and the progress of transit planners, the city of Houston continued to

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<sup>42</sup> Houston League of Women Voters, “Focus: Mass Transit,” March 1971, Box 44, Folder 6, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>43</sup> For survey numbers see Southwestern Center for Urban Research (SCUR), “Houston Mass Transportation Attitude Survey,” Box 54, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>44</sup> For survey conclusions see SCUR, “Mass Transit in Houston: A Survey of Citizen’s Attitudes: Final Report,” Box 54, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

prepare the ground for an authority vote by considering the purchase of the private bus line.<sup>45</sup> As a sign of officials' confidence that a public authority would be created, in the months before the Voorhees study was released, the city seemed poised to purchase the private system despite its high cost. Officials intended for this move to ease the transition to public operation of the transit system and to prove to skeptical Houstonians that a public entity could manage Houston's transit network. Thomas Tyson believed that if the city could provide better bus service prior to the HARTA vote that it could prove to be "a crucial step in winning public support for a more extensive rapid transit system of elevated trains and subways...Faster and better bus service would be the first visible sign of improved mass transportation."<sup>46</sup> The Voorhees plan was released before the city took action on the purchase. In the turmoil around the 1973 election, the city delayed all discussion of purchasing the bus line.

In October 1972, an environmental advocacy group, the Citizens' Environmental Coalition, hosted an "inquiry" into the mass transit situation. The group was Houston's leading environmental organization and a primary driver behind many environmental reforms in Houston during the 1970s such as the protection of bayous and cutting air pollution.<sup>47</sup> The event offered both transit proponents and opponents a public platform from which to broadcast their perspectives on the transit plan. A number of supporters testified to the merits of the program and its plan. Charles Trost, the Director of Planning for the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization, supported the system because in his experience "what you can afford is

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<sup>45</sup> Discussions of purchasing the bus lines appear in the Houston City Council Minutes throughout the 1960s.

<sup>46</sup> "City Appears Ready to Buy the Bus Line" *Houston Chronicle*, November 26, 1972, Box 10, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>47</sup> On environmentalism in Houston, Teresa Tomkins-Walsh, "A Concrete River Had to Be Wrong": Environmental Action on Houston's Bayous, 1935-1980" (PhD Dissertation, University of Houston, 2009).

what gets done and we cannot afford to widen our freeways, widen our major thoroughfares, or live with accumulative vehicles producing air pollution.” In his eyes, the only option was to build the rapid transit system.<sup>48</sup>

Even some earlier opponents of mass transit, like the Texas Good Roads Association, expressed guarded support for the plan. Through the testimony of Gene Robbins, the group’s Executive Secretary, the association said it could approve the plan if transit construction was accompanied by continued “highway and street construction” and if funding for transit came “from sources other than the Highway Trust Fund.”<sup>49</sup> Even with these qualifications, the fact that the association begrudgingly accepted the Voorhees plan demonstrated the seeming inevitability of its passage at this stage. The only voice of dissent, or, perhaps more accurately, of doubt, came from Dr. George Strong, Assistant Director of the Rice University’s Southwest Center for Urban Research. Strong raised questions about the practicalities of the plan, specifically asking about the cost of the proposal, access to the system by the poorer residents of the city, and the makeup of the Authority itself. While Keith assured Strong and the other listeners that the plan would adequately address each of these concerns, Strong’s comments would echo through the later debate and influence the outcome of the election.

While, as we have seen, many road builders and developers proved to be among the opponents of mass transit, two prominent entities joined forces in hope of capitalizing on Houston’s turn toward transit. In late 1970, Gerald Hines Interests and Brown & Root Inc. announced a joint-venture to create BRH Mobility Systems, a company that would “provide a combination of capabilities and experiences in transit system development,

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<sup>48</sup> Testimony of Charles Trost, “Mass Transit: An Inquiry on the Recommendation of The Alan M. Voorhees Company,” Citizens’ Environmental Coalition Educational Fund, October 1972, Box 45, Folder 6, Citizen’s Environmental Coalition Collection, 03/2007-001, SCLUH.

<sup>49</sup> Testimony of Gene Robbins, *Ibid.*

design, implementation and operation, construction, and real estate planning and development.”<sup>50</sup> The fact that two prominent, pro-development Houston companies—up to the 1970s, Brown and Root Inc. was one of the largest road building firms in the state of Texas and Gerald Hines was among the largest real estate developers in the city—combined to form a transit company, signified the tacit approval of the pending transit plan by some of Houston’s business leaders who hoped the system would mean a boom in development.<sup>51</sup> BRH even went so far as to create bulletins to sell the unapproved system that extolled “the ways a proper assessment of transit can help liberate urban and medical centers, new towns, universities and airports from traditional barriers.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite opposition from some quarters, the support for transit at the local, state, and national level seemed to preordain the successful creation of HARTA. On March 2, 1973, Voorhees & Associates released their much-anticipated final report. Two weeks after the plan came out, the Houston City Council adopted it as their official transit plan and called for the formation of a provisional HARTA board. One week after that, the Houston-Galveston Area Council did as well.<sup>53</sup> Days later, in what State Representative Kay Bailey called a “surprise” the Houston Chamber of Commerce announced its support for the HARTA enabling legislation then under consideration, despite the grumblings of some of its developer and road building members.<sup>54</sup> For most of Houston’s history, when such a wide collection of the city’s political and business establishment backed a

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<sup>50</sup> “Mass transit company formed” *Houston Post* October 29, 1970, Box 55, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>51</sup> “Mass Transit Routes Make Real Estate Values Soar,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 15, 1970, H-Transportation: 1970-1974 VF, HMRC.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Joel Bates, Managing Partner of BRH to Thomas Tyson, July 2, 1971, Box 55, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>53</sup> Tyson to Ford, May 8, 1973.

<sup>54</sup> “C of C endorses bill to create mass transit authority for city,” *Houston Post*, n.d. 1973, Box 39, Folder: Mass Transit-Clippings, Kay Bailey Collection, MSS 17, HMRC.

program, it was implemented. In May 1973, shepherded by Houston-area representatives Hawkins Menafee and Kay Bailey, the Texas State Legislature passed Senate Bill 642, which allowed major cities to form public transit authorities after approval by their citizens.<sup>55</sup>

### **THE PLAN AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Briefly exploring the details of HARTA and the primary complaints of its opponents will help to explain the debate that emerged in the months prior to the October 1973 vote. Four questions quickly came to the fore of the HARTA debate. First, what type of system—rail, buses, or expanded highways—would the Authority and the Voorhees plan focus on and what areas would they serve? Second, who would be in charge of the Authority and how would the voices of both Houston and its surrounding municipalities balance? Third, how would the city pay for HARTA and its network? Fourth, what governing power would the HARTA board possess and what checks would exist for those powers?

HARTA intended to implement the two-stage Voorhees plan, which captured the balanced investment language and commitment to both roads and transit that leaders touted during initial discussions. In the first stage, forty miles of new system infrastructure would be created. This mileage consisted of both fixed guideway transit as well as express and priority bus routes on existing highways. The plan provided for two primary fixed guideways and two shorter guideway spurs for the use of some form of rail transit—most likely a heavy rail system similar to the subway trains used in New York and the El cars used in Chicago. The paths of two primary guideways hugged close to

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<sup>55</sup> Texas, *Cities and Towns--Rapid Transit Authorities*, 63<sup>rd</sup> Regular Session of the Texas Legislature, Chapter 141, General and Special Laws of Texas. Text of Senate Bill 642 available at the Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/legis/billsearch/BillDetails.cfm?legSession=63-0&billTypeDetail=SB&BillNumberDetail=642>, last accessed April 4, 2012.



existing highway networks along State Highway 59 to the southwest of downtown and Interstate 10 running west from downtown. These two segments stretched from the Inner Loop into downtown. The two guideway spurs shot off the Highway 59 route. One route linked the University of Houston, Texas Southern University, and the Third Ward area to downtown. This route also contained a planned extension to Hobby Airport. The other spur moved north of downtown toward the Inner Loop and served as the first leg of an eventual route toward the Intercontinental Airport. The major travel corridors neglected by guideway plans would receive busways—planned as elevated, separate lanes similar to today’s existing HOV lanes. These busways would be created on both the northern and southern sections of Interstate 45, as well as on State Highway 288. The first stage came with a \$795 million price tag. The second stage extensions, which would add another 41 miles of rapid transit system, cost an additional \$655 million. Together, the plan called for a total of \$1.45 billion in spending.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For details of the plan see Alan M. Voorhees & Associates, “Transit Program for Houston: A Summary Report, 1973,” Box 2, Planning Reports 1968-1973, CHPD, RG A 04, HMRC; Transit Action Program, *Newsbriefs*, May 1972 vol. 2, no. 3, published by the City of Houston, CHPD, RG A 20, HMRC.

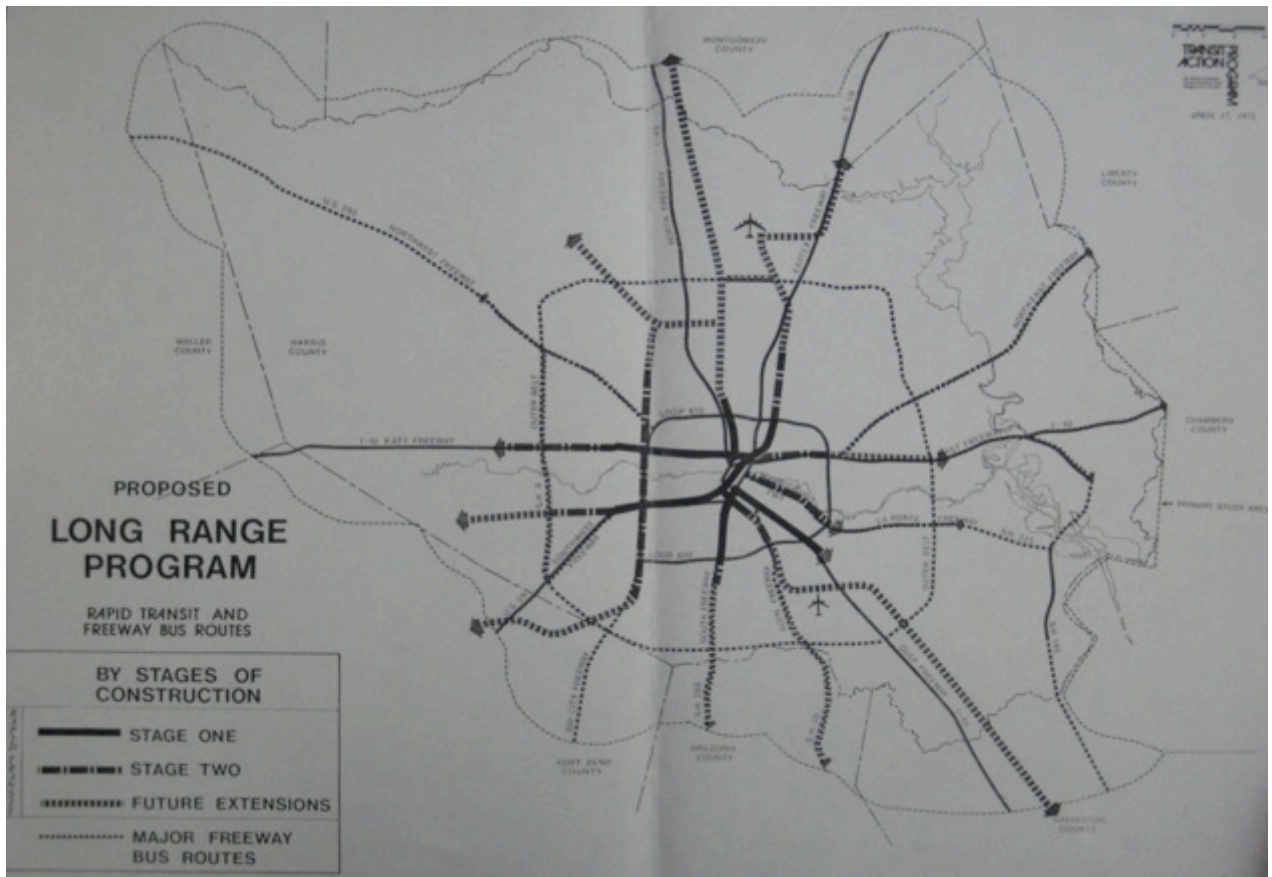


Figure 4.1: HARTA Plan

The proposed rapid transit plan of the Voorhees Company shows the first and second stages of rapid transit, fixed guideway construction, as well as potential expansions of that system and of freeway busways. The plan was contentious for many Houstonians because of a perceived lack of service to minority and working class suburban areas. Transit Action Program, “Long Range Program,” 1973, Folder 6, Box 49, City of Houston Public Service Department Collection, RG A 20, HMRC.

The Voorhees report argued that creating a balanced system of road and transit would benefit the users of both by producing citywide cost savings. According to the final report, unlike a purely auto-dependent system—where “Houston-Harris County residents will be spending 50 billion dollars or more” on comprehensive costs of road and vehicle maintenance, new road construction, gas costs, and congestion costs between 1973 and 1990—a mass transit system could be built and maintained for roughly \$2

billion over the same period.<sup>57</sup> At the same time transit would create “large direct and indirect benefits to the community” by easing congestion on the roadways and creating a more balanced system.<sup>58</sup> The report also pointed out that the mixed development of busways and fixed guideways would avoid future congestion issues that would occur if only busways were implemented—a predication that came true in the congestion problems of the 1980s.<sup>59</sup>

Opponents and skeptics of the plan quickly pointed out the limited nature of the plan’s route—with the major opposition coming from African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and working-class white residents from surrounding municipalities in the HMA. Each of these populations doubted that the routes planned for their areas would be built in a timely fashion, if at all. Basing their reactions on the details of the plan, these critics argued that city officials were more concerned with buttressing the economic strength of the central business district and improving the mobility of wealthier white residents in the city and northern suburbs than adequately serving all parts of the city. Communities of color outside of the Third Ward saw that no part of the system would immediately serve them, and suburbanites to the southeast saw a plan with no concrete timeline for the service to reach their communities. In addition to the proposed routes, the economic rationale articulated by most city officials for the transit system and the widespread support for a system by downtown businesses and interest groups like the Chamber of Commerce led many Houstonians to question the true intentions of the system. Was it, as officials attempted to pitch it, a system for all of Houston? Or, rather,

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<sup>57</sup> Voorhees & Associates, “Transit Action Program, Section One: Recommendations, Problem and Solutions,” 1973, Box 47, Folder 14, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC, 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

did it represent a system intended to benefit the few who lived along the route and those businesses that would benefit at the cost of many?

The anatomy of the Authority also engendered a great deal of discussion and debate. The makeup of the board proved particularly controversial for many in the metropolitan region. The proposed Authority covered not just Houston, but the entire HMA. Because of the wide territory, the board would include “representation from all local governments,” with membership based “either on population, annual costs of transit to each represented government or the amount of transit service rendered.”<sup>60</sup> Metropolitan and state officials decided the board would consist of nine members—five appointed by the Houston City Council, two appointed by the mayors of the surrounding municipalities within the HARTA territory, and two appointed by Harris County Commissioners. The appointing entities convened the provisional HARTA board on August 23, 1973.<sup>61</sup> Officials tasked the board with selling the Authority and its plan. Appointed with just over a month to go before the election, the nine board members took over the public relations push from city officials like Thomas Tyson, and attempted to navigate the debate surrounding the vote.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Voorhees & Associates, “Transit Action Program, Section One,” 4.

<sup>61</sup> The nine board members were Willoughby Williams (president of American General Insurance, city council appointee), Carole Pinkett (Humble Oil employee, community activist, city council appointee), Mary Rollins (League of Women Voters official, city council appointee), Mario Quinones (president of Houston Tile Co. and chairman of Pan American National Bank, city council appointee), Sam Bowman (president of Northwest National Bank, city council appointee), Knox Askins (La Porte city attorney, municipalities appointee), Sebron Williams (Deer Park Superintendent of schools, municipalities appointee), John Garret (president of Richmond Road & Engineering Co., county appointee), and Herman Lauhoff (president of the Greater Houston Civic Council, county appointee). Carole Pinkett is African-American, Mario Quinones was Mexican-American. They were the only two non-whites on the board. See “City council names 5 to mass transit board” *Houston Post*, August 15, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; “Mayors name 2 to board,” *Houston Post*, August 17, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; “Transit authority positions filled,” *Houston Post*, August 24, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>62</sup> “Transit appointees agree: educating public their task” *Houston Post*, August 19, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

Moving beyond the concrete details of the plan and the board, the next question that arose centered on finances. While they ultimately settled on a vehicle emissions tax as the primary financing mode, before doing so officials studied the payment methods used by other cities and transit authorities. A variety of funding mechanisms supported such entities across the nation: Baltimore employed a gasoline tax, Atlanta a sales tax, San Francisco a property tax.<sup>63</sup> Given Texas' long history of rejecting progressive taxes and relying on regressive funding structures such as sales and property taxes, Houston officials worried that the electorate would object to taxation. They also recognized, however, that the system required significant local financing in order to ensure matching funds from federal coffers. The enabling legislation laid out the emissions tax and made it clear that the Authority would have no other taxing authority outside of it. Officials sold the emissions tax as a user fee. Those who drove on, and clogged, the roads, they argued, should pay for the system that would bring them respite. The proposed tax rate varied based on the size and displacement of one's engine—the larger the engine, the higher the rate—ranging from \$4 to \$15 a year for most drivers.<sup>64</sup> In his public pitch to Houstonians one month prior to the vote, Louie Welch reminded people that the “local tax dollar will be matched by up to four federal dollars” and that all the taxes paid “should be more than refunded through time saved due to reduced congestion and in gas saved from avoiding longer and longer waits in traffic.”<sup>65</sup> Despite these assurances, as the HARTA debate heated up, this tax received a great deal of criticism.

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<sup>63</sup> Transit Action Program, *Newsbriefs*, May 1972, vol. 2, no. 3, published by the City of Houston, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>64</sup> “Summary of SB 642,” Box 44, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; “A good mass transit bill,” *Houston Post*, March 7, 1973, Kay Bailey Collection, MSS 17, Box 39, Folder 2.

<sup>65</sup> Open letter from Louie Welch to Houstonians, September 1973, Box 5, Folder 19, Frank E. Mann Collection, MSS 049, HMRC.

The final point many observers questioned concerned the governing powers given to the HARTA board. The state enabling legislation allowed any transit authority in the state to levy the vehicle emissions tax, gave authorities the power of eminent domain, and declared that “ the use of property for other public purposes by the State of Texas, its municipal corporations and political subdivisions, and by public utilities and public service corporations, are subordinate and inferior to the higher use of such property for rapid transit purposes in metropolitan areas.”<sup>66</sup> While, as we shall see, the emissions tax raised the eyebrows of many Houstonians, the rights of eminent domain and the subordination of all other public entities to the land usage needs of the transit authority became a primary reason for many Houstonian’s opposition to HARTA.

These four questions framed the area’s debate over mass transit. Between May and October 1973, both advocates and opponents waged a public relations battle to sway the tide in their favor. The Authority and its plan, which seemed destined to pass at its conception, encountered stiffer than expected opposition. The resultant fight changed the functioning of the city’s politics and cemented the region’s reliance on roadways in the years to come.

## **THE DEBATE**

SB 642 established voter approval of HARTA as the last hurdle in establishing a public transit system for Houston. With the proposal out in the open, leaders and citizens could focus on the merits and drawbacks of a definitive entity and plan, not simply debate the amorphous idea of mass transit itself. Reflecting on the importance of the moment, and advocating for HARTA, the *Houston Post* called for “a countywide educational campaign” to “inform the voters on what needs to be done, on why it must be done, on

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<sup>66</sup> Texas, *Cities and Towns--Rapid Transit Authorities*, 63<sup>rd</sup> R.S., Ch. 141, General and Special Laws of Texas, 12.

how it will be financed and on the benefits to be gained.” The *Post* article continued, noting that in order to ensure success, leaders needed to “undertake a thorough, comprehensive, neighborhood-by-neighborhood” approach to bring the details of HARTA to “public hearings...schools, civic clubs, and community centers.”<sup>67</sup> While transit advocates expected an easy sell given the pro-transit momentum of the previous years, they nonetheless began a strong push for the system. City officials, members of the TAP steering committee, and the HARTA board led the charge for approval. Transit advocates would not be alone at the community institutions at which they spoke, however. Nor would their opinions be the only ones heeded by voters. As the days crept toward the October election, more and more opponents emerged to challenge the HARTA backers.

Houston’s African American and ethnic Mexican citizens, working-class white suburbanites, and road proponents each articulated different elements of the four major questions as their primary concerns. While none of these populations were monolithic in their resistance to the Authority, those against HARTA outnumbered those in support. The opposition developed slowly between May and September, but in the final weeks of the campaign, opponents to the Authority cropped up from all parts of the HMA. Faced with unexpected opposition, transit backers backpedaled and focused their energy on creating the transit authority, even if that meant sacrificing parts of the Voorhees plan. Transit advocates pivoted away from the Voorhees plan in order to deflect criticism, but this resulted in the loss of a concrete plan. As the vote approached, the abandonment of the Voorhees recommendations and the subsequent lack of a definite plan created one of the biggest stumbling blocks toward a HARTA victory.

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<sup>67</sup> “Moving Mass Transit,” *Houston Post*, May 17, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

The African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians who opposed HARTA—and the elected officials that represented them—voiced two major complaints. First, they argued that the planning effort ignored the needs and concerns of the communities. Based on their experiences with the city’s highways, many doubted promises that transit service would reach their neighborhoods and felt that HARTA offered a system that served only the interests of wealthier whites in the city and its northern suburbs. Second, many considered the emissions tax problematic and regressive. Importantly, the opposition from the city’s communities of color focused on the details of the HARTA plan, not the idea of mass transit in general. Indeed, both before and after the vote, African American and ethnic Mexican leaders recognized the importance of mass transit and advocated for an appropriate system. As far back as 1969, Quentin Mease, the director of the YMCA in the predominantly black Third Ward, wrote to City Councilman Frank Mann encouraging the city to address “the plight of the urban poor” by installing “a comprehensive mass transit system,” that could provide “all the necessary mobility to ensure equal employment.”<sup>68</sup> While the city’s communities of color came to reject HARTA because of worries about inequity, the words of Houstonians like Mease as well as later support for mass transit showed that African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians generally supported the idea of transit, just not the details HARTA proposal.<sup>69</sup>

Concern that service would be confined to Houston alone and worries about Houston’s ability to dictate HMA decisions drove much of the resistance from working-class and middle-class suburbanites who disapproved of transit. Only in close-in northern

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<sup>68</sup> Letter from Quentin Mease, ED of Houston YMCA to Frank E Mann, July 24, 1969, Box 4, Folder 7, Frank Mann Papers, MSS 49, HMRC.

<sup>69</sup> This idea was corroborated by both former State Rep. Anthony Hall in a non-recorded conversation with the author and by Carole Pinkett. Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording. Both Hall and Pinkett asserted that the city’s African American community recognized the need and importance of mass transit and hoped the city would eventually get one, however, they were unable to support HARTA because of specific concerns with the plan.



suburbs did suburbanites feel the system might serve them. While suburban opponents echoed concerns about lack of service and the emissions tax, most questioned the representation on the board and the powers that it possessed. Like suburbanites, road proponents maintained a constant stream of criticism that revolved around the belief that only expanded roadways would allow the region to maintain adequate mobility.

One of the earliest signs of trouble for HARTA emerged when the League of Women Voters withdrew its endorsement from the 1972 transit opinion survey it helped conduct, citing a lack of proportional input to its results by Houstonians of color. In a May 30, 1973, letter to the president of Southwest Center for Urban Research, League president Laura Kever announced that the organization needed “to disassociate the League from the survey” because of the “underrepresentation of blacks and Mexican-Americans in the survey sample.”<sup>70</sup> In a letter to Mayor Welch written the same day, Kever outlined the survey’s problems. In 1973, whites made up 61 percent of Houston’s population, African Americans totaled 26 percent, and ethnic Mexicans made up roughly 12 percent. The survey, however, took 80 percent of its responses from white Houstonians, 12 percent from African Americans, and 7 percent from ethnic Mexican Americans.<sup>71</sup> The League’s withdrawal stemmed less from a concern about the input of minority Houstonians and more from apprehension that such an obvious problem could weaken the city’s overall push toward transit. Kever and the League worried that the flawed survey afforded communities of color evidence for their “contention that current mass transit plans are designed primarily to serve white, middle-class citizens” and

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from Laura Kever to Ralph Conant, May 30, 1973, Box 44, Folder 6, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Laura Kever to Louie Welch, May 30, 1973, Box 44, Folder 6, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

thought that abandoning the results might undermine this criticism before it damaged the prospects of the vote.<sup>72</sup>

While the concerns raised by the League foreshadowed protests that would emerge closer to the election, the early summer of 1973 saw few disruptions to the steady drumbeat of transit proponent's arguments. In the June issue of *Houston*, the Chamber of Commerce's in-house publication, Chamber president Bernard Sakowitz gave his and the Chamber's reasons for supporting HARTA. In his editorial, Sakowitz lauded the fact that HARTA gave officials a chance to plan for the HMA's growth. He argued that acting on HARTA in 1973, before traffic became intolerable, could ensure that the city has "the answer available...when the real crunch comes." He called on Houstonians to give their support to the Authority.<sup>73</sup> By late June, minor route complaints and questions about the emissions tax represented the bulk of negative comments about HARTA. Transit advocates felt that the path to victory would be smooth.<sup>74</sup>

The League of Women Voters, despite backing away from the opinion survey, maintained their push for a successful transit vote. Led by HARTA board member Mary Rollins and Laura Kever, the organization continued to sell the concept of transit to Houstonians. In an appearance before the Houston City Council, Kever pointed out that Houstonians, whether "housewives whose days are spent chauffeuring children because bike riding is unsafe; workers who must be paid higher wages in order to buy and maintain the car to get to work," or "shoppers who cannot find a parking place," one constant united them: all wanted easier ways of getting where they needed to be. Kever framed HARTA as an entity that could "save the city from choking on pollution,

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<sup>72</sup> Kever to Conant, May 30, 1973.

<sup>73</sup> Bernard Sakowitz, "Rapid Transit System depends on you," *Houston*, June 1973, HMRC.

<sup>74</sup> "No Big opposition surfacing for area rapid transit plan," *Houston Post*, June 25, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

strangling in vehicle tie-ups,” and also “guarantee to each citizen the basic right of mobility.”<sup>75</sup> Keever’s words supported the major points of transit supporters about congestion and the environment, while also acknowledging the need to listen to the concerns of lower-class, transit-dependent, and minority Houstonians.

The same day that Keever addressed the Houston City Council, the first real signs of opposition surfaced in some surrounding suburban communities and Houston’s African American population. In Pasadena, Houston’s largest working-class suburb that sat to the southeast of the city along the ship channel, the City Council voted to oppose HARTA because they saw “nothing that [would] serve Pasadena or serve the ship channel areas,” and therefore could not justify “levying a tax on Pasadena people...until such time as it [the HARTA plan] has been adjusted to render service to this area.” In addition, the community’s leaders found it unfathomable that the HARTA board, dominated as it was by Houstonians, would set the boundaries of the area to be taxed. In their eyes such authority seemed almost unconstitutional.<sup>76</sup> Addressing the same council meeting as Keever, Pluria Marshall, an black civil rights leader, said that he and other African Americans could not support HARTA because without a definitive plan they did not “know what you’re asking them to vote for” and they feared that the system would “would turn out to be a high-class system for affluent suburbanites that would further isolate inner city areas.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Statement of Laura Keever before the Houston City Council, June 27, 1973, Box 61, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>76</sup> “Pasadena council opposes mass transit proposal,” *Houston Post*, June 27, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>77</sup> “Few disagree on rapid transit needs,” *Houston Post*, June 27, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC. Marshall’s concern about the lack of information also echoes the opinion voiced by HARTA board member Carole Pinkett about a lack of information reaching the city’s black community. Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

These trickles of resistance quickly turned into a stream, as other suburban communities backed Pasadena. One by one, outlying municipalities demanded that they be left out of the proposed taxing district or that they receive a greater say in the planning of the system's services. Some wealthier, almost exclusively white suburban municipalities in the northern and northwestern parts of Harris County supported HARTA because the leaders of these growing areas secured service promises—mostly rapid bus service—from the board.<sup>78</sup> However, by the end of July 1973 the larger working-class municipalities to the city's southeast, including Pasadena, Baytown, La Porte, Deer Park, and South Houston, stood staunchly opposed to a system that would take “10 years to get to Pasadena,” and “25 to get to La Porte.”<sup>79</sup>

Piling on to the opposition act, Leonel Castillo, a prominent ethnic Mexican leader and Houston City Controller, announced his opposition to HARTA. In his complaints against the Authority, Castillo focused on the emissions tax and the slow implementation of such a large system. Castillo criticized the system's financing plan as “the imposition of an unfair and phony tax” on Houstonians and argued that HARTA would just become “another huge bureaucracy for citizens to cope with.” Castillo did not simply oppose HARTA, however; he also proposed his own mass transit plan. Castillo called for the expansion of many smaller forms of transit such as taxis, rental cars, jitneys, and car pools. He also argued for tighter pollution ordinances, for the buying of the private bus system, and for the creation of park & ride systems. In summing up his

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<sup>78</sup> Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Quote from “Transit opposition grows,” *Houston Post*, July 18, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC. For other suburban resistance see “South Houston C of C against transit authority,” *Houston Post*, July 25, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; “Mass transit traveling rough road,” *Houston Post*, July 12, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

own plan, Castillo said the city should take quicker, less expensive steps first, that it should “try the Chevy before...the Rolls Royce.”<sup>80</sup>

Transit advocates responded to this growing opposition by ramping up their campaign and shifting their tactics. In order to deflate criticisms against the details of the Voorhees plan, elected officials and even the HARTA board began to distance themselves from it, intimating that after its creation, the Authority would not have to implement the plan’s details. Willoughby Williams, a HARTA board member, signaled the shift away from the Voorhees plan by insisting the board possessed flexibility in the creation of the ultimate plan. Willoughby assured Houstonians that, once permanently in place, the board would start “compiling a list of as many alternative” plans as could be found “and communicating with the community about those alternatives.”<sup>81</sup> HARTA board members and other transit supporters hoped that acknowledging the complaints of critics and opening the possibility of a different plan would appease voters and let the Authority sort out details later.

With just weeks remaining before the vote and transit supporters scrambling to extinguish the many, but growing fires of criticism, the most prominent opponent yet announced his opposition to HARTA. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Harris County Commissioner Tom Bass announced that for months he “had private reservations” about the vote that he could no longer keep to himself. Given the choices facing the region, Bass argued, the best option for the region was to “vote the proposal down, go back to the legislature and hammer out a specific proposal that offers a solution” to the region’s problems. Bass insinuated that transit supporters purposefully made the referendum into a special

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<sup>80</sup> “Castillo backs own 16-point plan,” *Houston Post*, August 30, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>81</sup> “Drive being cranked for transit vote ok,” *Houston Post*, September 6, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

election avoiding the higher turnout of a November vote. In Bass' eyes this tactic epitomized the unfortunate "'public be damned' attitude" embraced by transit advocates in the debate. Bass concluded by asking twenty questions of transit supporters and said he would "quite willingly support the October 6<sup>th</sup> referendum" if advocates could answer them satisfactorily. Echoing complaints of other opponents, Bass challenged the powers of the HARTA board and the board itself. He labeled the board a "super government," and worried what an unelected entity with unlimited taxing powers and no one to hold it accountable would do to the region.<sup>82</sup>

In response to Bass' questions, advocates attempted to dispel concerns about the board's power, arguing that the Authority did not possess more powers than those of the county or the city. Supporters also maintained that state statutes proscribed HARTA's rights of eminent domain. In response to the accusation that the board would be unaccountable to Harris County residents, advocates pointed out that other entities, such as the Houston Port Authority and the Harris County Hospital District, possessed similar powers and appointed boards, yet had not caused any major problems in the region.<sup>83</sup> The League of Women Voters and other supporters also tried to deflate Bass' critiques. The League urged Houstonians to trust the HARTA board in the same way that Texans had always trusted the appointed Texas Highway Commission, which "planned well and gave us the finest freeway system in the country."<sup>84</sup> If residents trusted HARTA, the League argued, the board would provide the city with an effective and fair system.

Opposition to HARTA slowly built up in Houston's African American and ethnic Mexican communities over the summer and came to a head in September, when the five

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<sup>82</sup> Press Release of Tom Bass, September 20, 1973, Box 61, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>83</sup> Response to Bass from unidentified transit supporter, Box 61, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>84</sup> Statement of Rachel Ohman, LOWV, before HARTA board, September 23, 1973, Box 61, Folder 4, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

recently elected minority representatives held a news conference to announce their opposition to HARTA. In planning the vote campaign, transit backers banked on the support of the city's communities of color because they believed the many transit-dependent individuals within these population would want the system and push for its approval.<sup>85</sup> When, with just two weeks remaining before the election, state representatives Mickey Leland, Craig Washington, Anthony Hall, Ben Reyes, and Senfronia Thompson, all of whom but Reyes, voted for the enabling legislation in the previous state legislative session, jointly announced that they could no longer back HARTA, they shook the foundation of the Authority's support. The legislators said that more time was needed for their constituents to discuss and clarify the goals of a transit authority. Channeling their constituents' concerns that a transit system might recreate the displacements of the highway building era, the Representatives discussed their worries that the board could abuse its power to "levy taxes, issues bonds, condemn private homes and businesses and employ its own police force." Finally, just as suburbanites felt their communities would have to wait for years to see service, Leland and the other representatives wondered whether the oft-ignored central city communities would likewise have to "wait 10 years before they see any benefit" from the system.<sup>86</sup>

The effect the opposition of such visible and vocal leaders of Houston's African-American and ethnic Mexican communities had on the electorate was unmistakable. In an article a few days after the announcement, the *Houston Informer*, one of the city's largest African American newspapers, lauded the representatives for their courage in "acting on behalf of the people" they represented. The officials' actions captured the ongoing

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<sup>85</sup> The same tactic was taken in the creation of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, where black voters held a prominent position in approving the system. See Altshuler and Lubberhoff, *Mega-Projects*, 71.

<sup>86</sup> "5 legislators taking stands to oppose transit authority," *Houston Post*, September 23, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

undercurrent of mistrust many African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians felt toward city and state officials. Given the negative experiences these groups had with earlier infrastructure projects and long-running issues with the city's police force, fears of lawful seizure of property and untrammelled political and police power seemed like substantial issues to many Houstonians of color.<sup>87</sup> The final straw for both the legislators and their supporters, though, was the lack of "commitment to any plan whatsoever in structuring the system" after the abandonment of the Voorhees plan.<sup>88</sup> The Authority's inability to present a definite plan amplified feelings of mistrust, because voters wanted to see concrete details in order to guarantee that "transit lines will not be detrimental to minority neighborhoods."<sup>89</sup>

HARTA board member Carole Pinkett recalled that the effort to convince African Americans to support the proposal suffered greatly because of the lack of a plan. In the public meetings she attended Pinkett witnessed countless Houstonians ask important questions about details which she and other board members could not address because of the move away from the Voorhees plan. Pinkett also believed that the HARTA board had failed to connect with the right power brokers among non-white Houstonians. The board made connections with traditional institutions and leaders, ignoring the obvious political need to recognize the emergence of new leaders like Leland and Thompson. Pinkett recalled that, while the board appealed to church leaders and some prominent black business leaders, these leaders no longer possessed the same level of power they did in the 1950s because the civil rights organizations they headed in that decade had declined

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<sup>87</sup> For a discussion of issues between the city's communities of color and the Houston Police Department, see Dwight Watson, *Race and the Houston Police Department, 1930–1990: A Change Did Come* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

<sup>88</sup> "Minority lawmakers criticize area transit proposal," *Houston Informer*, September 29, 1973, HMRC, 1

<sup>89</sup> "Transit fear use denied," *Houston Post*, September 28, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.



in importance by the 1970s. Without effective organizations to act as mouthpieces for their message, this group of leaders failed to convince other African Americans of the need to support HARTA.<sup>90</sup> They also could not secure the backing of major black civil rights groups or labor groups, seeing both the NAACP and the AFL-CIO, which had many working-class white members along the ship channel, join the opposition. The leader of the city's NAACP argued the city needed transit, but could not risk creating "a Frankenstein over which the people have no control."<sup>91</sup> The board faced similar problems with Houston's ethnic Mexican residents. The Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations announced their opposition on October 1<sup>st</sup>. The organization highlighted their concern that the emissions tax would "impose a heavier tax burden on the elderly, those on fixed incomes and those on welfare," as their primary reason for opposing the referendum.<sup>92</sup>

The opposition of the five state representatives and the evaporation of support among Houston's African American and ethnic Mexican populations, coupled with announcements of opposition from the remainder of the Harris County Commissioners and the Harris County Mayors and Councilmen's Association, dissolved any semblance of political unity on the subject of HARTA within the HMA.<sup>93</sup> In the summer of 1973, it appeared to the HARTA board and its supporters that they possessed a united political

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<sup>90</sup> Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012; "Transit Plan gains support of minorities," *Houston Post*, October 2, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; This thought echoes that of Journalist Saul Friedman who wrote about the transition away from the traditional black power broker of the city in his "Life in Black Houston," Manuscript, *Houston Chronicle* Series 1965, Saul Friedman Papers, Folder 9, SC123, Box 13, HMRC; "Transit system needed by inner-city residents, minority spokesmen insist," *Houston Informer*, October 6, 1973, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in "Baptist ministers, NAACP strongly oppose transit plan," *Houston Informer*, October 6, 1973, 1; "Architects say yes, others no on transit" *Houston Post*, September 30, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; "Both sides say mass transit proposal in trouble," *Houston Post*, September 30, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>92</sup> PASO press release, October 1, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>93</sup> KYXZ Editorial, "Opposition to Mass Transit Election Mounts," September 26, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

front for their campaign; that they had the sort of wide-ranging support that guaranteed a victory. The disappearance of this support left only city officials, transit backers, and some state legislators standing to attempt a last ditch sell of the Authority and to hope for a sliver-thin victory. Board member Carole Pinkett believes that the miscalculation of political support and the inability to maintain backing from politicians during the campaign ultimately doomed the vote.<sup>94</sup>

In the final days of the campaign, hoping to garner just enough support to succeed, HARTA backers released a final public relations push through the newspapers. The *Houston Chronicle* reminded readers that “it has taken us years to get into our present transportation mess—and it is a mess—and only by starting now can we extract ourselves without bogging down.” It warned that either “the Authority is approved Saturday or we will continue to stew for additional years in our traffic jams” and watch as “federal funds now offered pour out of our city.”<sup>95</sup> The attempt to link the Authority to the wider acquisition of mobility, though, could not overcome the snowballing opposition and the concerns of HARTA’s critics.

## **THE OUTCOME AND CONCLUSIONS**

Well before officials tallied the final votes on the evening of October 6<sup>th</sup>, the results were clear—local voters rejected the HARTA referendum by a three-to-one margin. In the end, despite months of lead-up and constant media coverage, only sixteen percent of the registered voters in the proposed taxing district cast a ballot. In areas of substantial opposition, such as the southeastern suburbs of Pasadena, Deer Park, and South Houston, the margin of defeat was closer to four-to-one. The same ratio held in

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<sup>94</sup> Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

<sup>95</sup> “Confused over transit?” *Houston Chronicle*, October 4, 1973, Box 48, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

predominantly African American and ethnic Mexican precincts as well. In total, 98,457 people voted against the referendum and only 35,680 approved.<sup>96</sup>

The post-mortem dissection of the vote's failure began almost immediately. HARTA member Willoughby Williams placed most of the blame on working-class suburban opponents. Newspaper accounts also chalked the defeat up to the resistance by liberal and minority leaders like Leonel Castillo and the five state legislators.<sup>97</sup> Other board members believed that they had not been given enough time to sell Houstonians on the concept.<sup>98</sup> Thomas Tyson agreed with HARTA board members. Writing to inform Jerome Premo of the Urban Mass Transportation Administration about the results of the vote a few days after the defeat, Tyson said that the major flaw lay in giving the board only five weeks "to educate the public to the need of mass transit in the area and the associated need for the regional authority." Tyson lamented the still stinging reality that "an uninformed or poorly informed public will generally vote down a tax increase."<sup>99</sup>

Reflecting on the vote, Carole Pinkett now believes that officials saw the HARTA attempt not as a realistic opportunity for transit, but rather as a test case for the concept of transit in the city. Pinkett believes that from early on, few higher-up officials actually thought the vote would pass on its first attempt and simply wanted to start the transit conversation.<sup>100</sup> While the previous years of activity around transit in the city contradict Pinkett's perspective, what is undeniable is that after the defeat transit proponents quickly

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<sup>96</sup> Transit authority crushed by voters," *Houston Post*, October 7, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012; "Politics, poor timing, killed transit issue, backers say," *Houston Post* October 7, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC. See also Pinkett's testimony in the Citizen's Environmental Coalition's "'A Fresh Look' at Mass Transit An Inquiry Conducted Under the Sponsorship for the Citizens' Environmental Coalition Report," March 1974, Citizen's Environmental Coalition Collection, Box 44, Folder 2, 03/2007-001, SCLUH.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Thomas Tyson to Jerome Premo, October 16, 1973, Box 57, Folder 8, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>100</sup> Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

began using language that described the HARTA vote not as a failure but rather as a stepping-stone for later transit development. This rhetorical shift indicated that many proponents remained committed to bringing mass transit to the city.

As proponents of HARTA began to spin the stepping-stone argument, they were joined in their calls for future consideration of mass transit by many of their recent opponents. Newspaper editorials insisted that “opponents and supporters must close rank...regroup and restart.”<sup>101</sup> When HARTA board member Knox Askins reflected on the defeat he concluded that the chance to start a “good public debate and discussion” was the best thing to come out of the negative vote. Sam Bowman, another HARTA board member, asserted that “there will eventually be a HARTA or the like...we should go back to the people with another referendum.”<sup>102</sup> Louie Welch, referring to Atlanta’s numerous unsuccessful referenda before the creation of that city’s transit authority, pointed out that “sometimes it takes two or three times to get” the Authority established.<sup>103</sup> Even opponents of HARTA like County Judge Bill Elliot began to call for a new plan “acceptable to the people.”<sup>104</sup> The call for a focus on future transit by both sides of the HARTA debate showed that Houstonians recognized that the city needed some sort of solution to its traffic and mobility problems. Moving forward from that common recognition, however, proved difficult for Houstonians, who could not agree on what form that solution should take or who should direct it.

Despite the seemingly widespread support for a “new plan” on the heels of the 1973 vote, conflicts around the city’s politics of mobility did not become any easier to

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<sup>101</sup> “Let’s get rolling,” *Houston Post*, October 12, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>102</sup> “Politics, poor timing, killed transit issue,” *Houston Post*

<sup>103</sup> “Welch says buying buses sole option,” *Houston Post*, October 8, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>104</sup> “Elliott Hopes to develop transit plans,” *Houston Post*, October 12, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

resolve. The rejection of HARTA strengthened the city's dependence on roadways as its primary provider of mobility and response to congestion. Further, the emergence of white working-class suburbanites, African Americans, and ethnic Mexicans into the contestation of the city's politics of mobility meant that the desires of new constituencies had to be considered during ensuing debates about transportation.

With one transit plan rejected, Houstonians attempted to find another way forward. Newly elected Mayor Fred Hofheinz moved to buy the bus lines soon after his 1974 inauguration, completing the purchase in April 1974 with funds from the federal government.<sup>105</sup> After completing the step of buying the system, however, the city's path forward turned bumpy. Without a tax-supported transit authority with which to manage the new transit asset, bus service continued to struggle. In addition, when state officials attempted to pass new enabling legislation for another try at creating local transit authorities, road advocates and lobbyists prevented the passage of new enabling legislation.

In 1974, Texas revised most of its state constitution. During revision debates, mass transit funding and use of highway funds were once again discussed. Fred Hofheinz testified before the state legislature during the convention, arguing that while Houston's freeways were essential to its early successful growth, the city had outgrown its "automobile-and-concrete transportation system" and required a way to convert a car city into a place with a "balanced transportation program...that is both viable and affordable."<sup>106</sup> This shift, Hofheinz acknowledged, would take money from both the state and the federal government. At this suggestion, as before, rural legislators and road

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<sup>105</sup> "Check for buying bus firm arrives" *Houston Post*, July 12, 1974, Box 48, Folder 5, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

<sup>106</sup> Testimony of Mayor Fred Hofheinz before the Texas State Transportation Committee, September 19, 1974, Box 24, Folder 23, Fred Hofheinz Papers, MSS 0079, HMRC.

advocates attacked such plans, arguing that “the real motive behind the assault on the sacred highway trust fund [was] to get rural Texans to pick up the tab for big city mass transit systems.”<sup>107</sup> In addition to rural Texans, suburban municipalities continued their resistance to Houston-centric transit plans. Houstonians and transit advocates attempted to alter the legislation in ways that opponents could accept, but ultimately enabling legislation would not be passed again until a 1978 special session.

Discussing the HARTA vote, a KXYZ radio editorial pointed out that never before had a measure with the backing of the “Houston Establishment”—people like “Mayor Welch and [prominent lawyer] Leon Jaworski,” and groups like the Houston Chamber of Commerce—been defeated, much less defeated three-to-one. Exploring the vote’s results in more detail, Houstonians noticed that while most middle-to-upper class whites supported the referendum, “Blacks, Mexican-Americans, lower-income whites, young people and many other groups” rejected it. Whereas earlier in Houston’s political history a supporting group could have successfully stifled turnout or simply expected low turnout, by 1973 “too many Blacks and Mexican-Americans vote to discount their importance.” While the editorial bemoaned the fact that this new political reality coalesced in the defeat of what in their eyes was a much-needed referendum and in other debates like the Harrisburg fight, it concluded that something positive came from the defeat. No longer would the establishment alone simply decide what was best for Houston and institute it through a nominal vote. Rather, after 1973, political aspirants would need to “go to the many groups who compose our population, involve them in the

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<sup>107</sup> “Mass Transit Rejection Haunts Charter Session,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 25, 1974, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC.

planning process,” and in the case of a future transit network, “convince each [group] of the importance of mass transit, both to them and to the city.”<sup>108</sup>

The fact that Fred Hofheinz stood before the state legislature during the 1974 constitutional debates as mayor of Houston confirmed the emergence of Houston’s African American and ethnic Mexican citizens as important forces within local and state elections. The influence they demonstrated in the 1973 HARTA vote carried over into the 1974 mayoral race, as Hofheinz, a young candidate from outside the city’s political order running against a handpicked successor to Louie Welch, garnered greater support and turnout in the black community than any other white candidate before him on his way to victory.<sup>109</sup> The embrace of Hofheinz by these citizens demonstrated their political consistency and revealed the real rationale for their rejection of HARTA. African American and ethnic Mexicans voted against HARTA because they saw it as a top-down proposal, not because they disliked or did not desire transit. In 1974, they likewise backed Hofheinz because his campaign worked more than any before it to incorporate their concerns and leaders into its plans.

The newly elected Mayor Hofheinz appointed both African American and ethnic Mexican Houstonians to prominent roles within the city government. He saw this moment as a “handing over the reins of power...the actual reins of power of government to very common people.” He recalled 1973 as the beginning of Houston’s urban coalition—made up of communities of color, liberals, and labor—and a move away from

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<sup>108</sup> KZYX Editorial, “Referendum Defeat Shows Houston Politics Has Changed,” October 9, 1973, Box 61, Folder 7, CHPSD, RG A 20, HMRC; Carole Pinkett also reflected this sentiment, seeing the opposition in the communities of color as an outgrowth from the inability of transit supporters to effectively communicate with those groups. Pinkett believes that 1973 is a turning point in terms of a mainstream embracing of Houston’s diversity. Carole Pinkett, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> “Hofheinz Faces Uphill Battle in Mayoral Runoff,” *Forward Times*, November 17, 1973, 7A, DBCAH.

the city's old-boy, elite political system.<sup>110</sup> Hofheinz's integration of the city government signaled a larger outcome of the HARTA debate's impact on the political balance of the HMA. The vote demonstrated to elected officials throughout the HMA that African American, ethnic Mexican, and working-class suburbanites were populations whose opinions on metropolitan issues could no longer be dismissed. While the coalition of voters that defeated HARTA only voted together on transportation issues once more, as Chapter Five will show, from 1973 onward the mobility demands of these groups increasingly came to fruition and as their new stake in Houston's political system grew.

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<sup>110</sup> Fred Hofheinz, interview by Marguerite Johnson Barnes, May 22, 1987, transcript, Box 1, Folder 14, Marguerite Johnson Barnes Collection, MSS 445, WRC, Rice University.



## **Chapter Five**

### **Building A Transit Constituency: The 1978 Creation of the Metropolitan Transit Authority**

In January 1976, just after taking the oath of office for the second time, Houston Mayor Fred Hofheinz reflected upon Houston's place in the hierarchy of American cities. "America is moving away from the older, more established centers of industry," Hofheinz intoned, shifting instead toward "the younger, newer cities; to the frontier; to the places where America's dreams still can be a reality; to the South, the Southwest and to Houston."<sup>1</sup> The city's growing stature, as well as its economic growth amid a national recession, gave Hofheinz reason to be optimistic about the future. Yet, for its many strengths, Hofheinz also knew that Houston faced a number of challenges. During his second term he, and citizens throughout the HMA, would contend with one such obstacle—the city's essential, yet volatile growth.

Increases in Houston's territorial size and population at once drove the HMA's economy and caused its most pressing problems. The city's at-capacity sewer system, its congested highways, and its poorly maintained infrastructure all exhibited strain from five decades of explosive development. Hofheinz asserted that despite the economic increases that accompanied it, untrammelled growth represented "the greatest hazard which lies ahead for Houston." Without proper planning and "the expenditure of funds now to avoid problems then," he warned, the city would crumple under the pressure of its own expansion.<sup>2</sup> No issue better captures the double-edged nature of Houston's growth than the HMA's attempts to solve its transportation problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Hofheinz, "Second Inaugural Address," January 2, 1976, Box 74, Folder 3, City of Houston Public Service Department (CHPSD) Collection, RG A 20, Houston Metropolitan Research City (HMRC).

<sup>2</sup> Hofheinz, "Second Inaugural Address."

The defeat of the Houston Area Rapid Transit Authority (HARTA) referendum in 1973 forced the city to start from square one if it wanted to augment its jammed highway network with rapid transit. In its first years, the Hofheinz Administration focused on bringing attainable improvements to the bus system and easing road congestion. The city purchased the failing private bus company in early 1974 and created HouTran to run the system.<sup>3</sup> Hofheinz also inaugurated the Office of Public Transportation in January 1975 to plan and construct an effective system.<sup>4</sup> Finally, city officials rehashed the idea of creating a self-supporting public transit agency to be called the Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO). The push to create the Authority culminated in another referendum in August 1978.<sup>5</sup> Determined not to repeat the mistakes that led to HARTA's defeat five years earlier, city and METRO officials carried out a carefully planned campaign aimed at gaining HMA-wide approval.

The 1978 proposal evolved from lessons learned from the HARTA failure and from the ongoing fight around the Harrisburg Freeway. As Chapters Three and Four demonstrated, the growing political power of the city's African American, ethnic Mexican, and suburban white working-class populations meant that ignoring these constituencies would make passing any HMA-wide initiative difficult. In fact, after the HARTA vote, the political power of these groups only increased as black, ethnic Mexican, and white migrants came to the city in hopes of capitalizing on its economic strength during the national recession.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tax Research Association of Houston and Harris County (TRAHH), December 1977 newsletter, Vol. 30, no. 12, H-Transportation, 1976-1977 Vertical File (VF), HMRC.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Barry Goodman to Gerald Koszer, November 10, 1975, Box 72, Folder 1, CHPSD, HMRC.

<sup>5</sup> The METRO referendum was made possible by the passage of HB 657 by the 65<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the State of Texas in 1977. HB 657 renewed a city's ability, set out in 1972 legislation, to create an authority and gave authorities the ability to levy a sales tax. See <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/legis/> for the text of the bills, last accessed June 24, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Houston's economic strength and migration to the city during the 1970s, see Beth Anne Shelton et. al., *Houston: Growth and Decline in a Sunbelt Boomtown* (Philadelphia: Temple

The population growth of African Americans and ethnic Mexicans between 1970 and 1980 propelled Houston toward majority-minority status. In 1970, 316,551 African Americans resided within the city of Houston and represented 25.7 percent of the total population. Houstonians of Mexican origin accounted for 150,000, or 12 percent of the total. By 1980, the population of black Houstonians jumped to 436,392 and made the group 27 percent of the city's total. The number of Houstonians of Mexican origin grew to 281,331 meaning this group represented 18 percent of the city's total. By 1978, the groups represented approximately 45 percent of the city's electorate, giving them significant influence over the approval or rejection of METRO.<sup>7</sup>

The population of white suburbanites in Harris County and its four neighboring counties—Galveston, Montgomery, Fort Bend, and Brazoria—also grew rapidly between 1970 and 1980. In total, 912,624 people moved into these five counties during the decade, and, of those, 695,879 or 76 percent, were white. Nearly two-thirds of the newcomers settled within Harris County, but outside of Houston. Another quarter moved to the four surrounding counties. The remainder, just over a tenth of the total, came to Houston. Black and ethnic Mexican populations also grew in non-Houston areas, increasing by about 120,000, with most settling in Harris County.<sup>8</sup>

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University Press, 1989); Nestor Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston," in Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz (eds.), *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> City of Houston, Race/Ethnicity: 1980-2000, [http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/docs\\_pdfs/Cy/coh\\_race\\_ethn\\_1980-2010.pdf](http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/docs_pdfs/Cy/coh_race_ethn_1980-2010.pdf), last accessed January 28, 2014. Roberto Treviño Jr., *Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Appendix A, 217. Social Explorer, Harris County Census Records, 1970 and 1980, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed January 28, 2014. U.S. Census Population of the Largest 100 Cities, 1980, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab21.txt>, last accessed January 28, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Social Explorer, Harris, Brazoria, Montgomery, Fort Bend, and Galveston County Census Records, 1970 and 1980, [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed January 28, 2014. U.S. Census Population of the Largest 100 Cities, 1980, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab21.txt>, last accessed January 28, 2014.

Leaders of the METRO campaign confronted these new demographic realities by offering a plan that attempted to balance the conflicting views of mobility held by its diverse constituents.<sup>9</sup> The interim board increased the number of public meetings in both communities of color and the suburbs. METRO promised all voters that any new system would bring service to their communities within a few years. To black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians the agency promised to use affirmative action in hiring. Recognizing that nearly every suburban adult drove a personal automobile and depended upon the city's highways for their daily movements, METRO offered auto-oriented transit improvements like park-and-ride lots and contraflow lanes. They also argued that backing transit would lead to open roads for those who chose to remain in their cars. Finally, METRO altered the structure of the Authority to ensure that non-Houston municipalities would have more representation and created two citizen oversight boards to create accountability and provide a check to the Authority's powers.

The passage of the METRO referendum on August 12, 1978, signaled the success of officials' campaign strategy and marked the second time in five years that a majority of Houston's African American and ethnic Mexican citizens joined a plurality of white suburbanites to shape a key moment in the city's mobility development. The METRO coalition had one key change from HARTA. Unlike the earlier referendum, in the 1978 vote wealthier white suburbanites replaced working-class whites as the allies of non-white Houstonians. This switch occurred because Houston's fast-growing northern and northwestern suburbs all hoped METRO would improve their mobility. On the other

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<sup>9</sup> The need to create a constituency among both white and non-white voters in order to create a transit authority can also be seen in Atlanta's attempt to create the Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transportation Authority. See Miriam Konrad, *Transporting Atlanta: The Mode of Mobility Under Construction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009); Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2003), 71; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1989).

hand, white working-class suburbanites maintained their disdain for new taxes and mass transit systems that could not guarantee service. Despite the change, the alignment of these blocs remained unique. Beyond these groups, METRO enjoyed the support of most white Houston voters. That city and suburban residents combined to support METRO differentiated Houston's metropolitan politics from those of its national peers. At the same time that Houstonians brokered a metropolitan compromise, suburbanites in other American cities were engaged in full-blown tax revolts. Due partially to Houston's expansive political reach and to the fact that neither city residents nor suburbanites possessed the power to dictate terms to the other, the HMA did not descend into this type of fragmentation. This metropolitan equilibrium did much to determine the course of the METRO debate.<sup>10</sup>

If METRO's approval captured a moment of metropolitan compromise, its implementation contained the roots of division. While officials intended for the 1978 plan to address the HMA's transportation needs for the foreseeable future, suburb-heavy metropolitan growth upset the HMA's political balance and complicated METRO's attempts to spread resources evenly across the metro area. Nonetheless, the metropolitan approval of METRO can be viewed, like the HARTA vote before it, as another moment when non-elite and non-professional Houstonians asserted themselves into transportation decision-making. In 1973, citizens rejected yet another official-generated plan. In 1978, they approved one that they played a major role in crafting. The choices to create

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<sup>10</sup> A number of works have discussed the tax revolt and other forms of fragmentation. Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003); Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). For a discussion of the cultural differences between urban centers and their suburbs see Joseph A. Rodriguez, *City Against Suburb: The Culture Wars in an American Metropolis* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999).

METRO gave Houston its first public transit system and presented city officials with a new weapon in the fight to address the city's mobility problems.

### **TRANSIT FOR HOUSTON: PAVING THE WAY FOR METRO**

After the HARTA defeat and with the fight around the Harrisburg Freeway ongoing, Houstonians interested in having a conversation about transit attempted to bring as many perspectives to the table as possible. The Citizens' Environmental Coalition hosted a forum in March 1974 with just such a reorientation in mind. The event, "'A Fresh Look' at Mass Transit," included actors from both sides of the HARTA debate. While participants did not reach any major accords, speakers did reflect upon the lessons of the HARTA debate. Acknowledging the influential role white suburbanites, African Americans, and ethnic Mexicans played in the final outcome of the vote was a common refrain at the forum. Speakers on both sides of the transit question tried to puzzle out the key to winning the support of these groups. City officials, for their part, used the forum to recalibrate their transit sales pitch for future attempts. Jerry King, executive secretary to Mayor Hofheinz, told listeners that the city learned a great deal from the HARTA outcome, especially from critiques about the proposal's opaqueness and lack of details. King guaranteed that "any future authority will actively include and involve representatives from all political subdivisions" whose opinions "relative to mass transit are many and varied."<sup>11</sup> By acknowledging the diverse set of expectations that Houstonians brought to the politics of mobility and insisting that the city would not fail to account for this diversity in the future, King and the city began the work of building METRO's constituency well in advance of the Authority's birth.

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<sup>11</sup> Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC), "'A Fresh Look' at Mass Transit An Inquiry Conducted Under the Sponsorship for the Citizens' Environmental Coalition Report," March 1974, Box 44, Folder 2, Citizens' Environmental Coalition Collection (CECC), 07/2007-001, Special Collection Library at the University of Houston (SCLUH), 3-4.

If city officials projected confidence that careful work would lead to the eventual creation of a transit system, others at the forum expressed concern that HARTA's defeat ensured greater delays in addressing the city's transportation needs. Many worried that without the added capacity of a transit system, highway congestion would worsen, affecting the pace of economic growth. The national recession loomed over the local issues. Forum attendees were well aware that the economic slowdown limited the amount of funding federal and Texas lawmakers were willing to give for mass transit. While Houston's booming oil sector kept the city's economy humming, it felt the absence of state and federal aid for major projects. Coupled with HARTA's defeat, many Houstonians worried that a lack of funds would mean that no major projects could be inaugurated. Because of these concerns, some suggested embracing limited, but immediate actions to alleviate traffic issues. Leonel Castillo, the city controller who opposed HARTA because of its size and what he saw as an unfair tax burden on the city's poorest, called for a system oriented around helping Houstonians "get to and from work, play, church, school" with ease. Castillo believed a small-step approach could win approval because voters would pay for a system that proved it could "provide them with better and more efficient service."<sup>12</sup>

Searching for answers after the forum, the city embraced the approach promoted by leaders like Castillo. Its purchase of the private bus line in 1974 fit this mold, as did announcing plans for the building of a park-and-ride system on area highways. Even these immediate steps came with caveats. Many felt that ownership of the bus system would only increase the city's debt burden. Officials, well aware of the massive financial commitment transit companies required, hinted that it would consider placing another referendum for the creation of a public transit authority before Houstonians in order to

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<sup>12</sup> CEC, "'A Fresh Look' at Mass Transit," 6-9.

find a funding stream for the buses.<sup>13</sup> This idea remained just that, though, as worries about the political and economic costs of another failure led officials to build up to a second referendum over several years. Even without a plan in the wings, officials worked to find answers to the sticking points of the HARTA debate. Addressing citizen concerns about the lack of public input that went into HARTA became a primary focus. Barry Goodman, the inaugural director of the Office of Public Transportation, explained the import of this task when he asserted that only by cultivating “public awareness and participation in the planning and development” of any proposed new system could officials guarantee its passage.<sup>14</sup>

Houston’s slow approach to a second proposal drew the attention of national transit advocates who felt the time was ripe for American cities to implement mass transport systems. At a conference held in late 1976, Terrell Hill, an administrator for the Chicago Transit Authority, urged Houston and other cities still lacking a public transit agency to stop letting citizen referenda stand in their way and instead simply build the systems without voter approval. “Mass transit is accepted as a public service” and governments “continually take positive steps to make the quality of life better and nobody is asked to vote on them,” Hill argued.<sup>15</sup> While Houston officials remained

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Sakowitz, “Purchase Puts City in Driver’s Seat,” June 1974, *Houston*, HMRC, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Barry Goodman to Garvin Berry, August 21, 1975, Box 72, Folder 3, CHPSD, HMRC.

<sup>15</sup> “Houston is Urged to Create Mass Transit without Vote,” *Houston Chronicle* September 24, 1976. The early and mid-1970s saw several cities use newly available streams of mass transit funding from the federal government to begin transit projects, see Altshuler and Luberhoff, *Mega-Projects*, 76-123; 176-218. Hill also describes a shift in the perception of publically-funded transportation agencies. Between 1900 and 1960 almost all transit companies in the nation operated as private businesses. It was only after transit ridership dropped precipitously after World War II that cities began to seriously consider supporting mass transit with public funds. Many have written about how the definition of transit as private business facilitated the growth of automobiles and the creation auto-centric cities. See Paul F. Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transport: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1983); Brian Cudahy, *Cash, Tokens, and Transfers: A History of Urban Mass Transit in North America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990); David Jones, *Mass Motorization + Mass Transit: An American History and Policy Analysis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana



committed to an eventual large-scale program, many, including former Mayor Louie Welch and Goodman, rejected Hill's advice to act fast. They worried that memories of the divisive HARTA debate might sour Houstonians toward any rushed proposals. Instead, they stuck with their plan to pave the way for a future referendum by first implementing lower-cost, traffic-relieving measures. City officials hoped these improvements would serve to ease immobility and give Houstonians a reason to back an authority.

In addition to taking several smaller actions, officials attempted to incorporate Houstonians into the transit planning process by soliciting feedback through participatory planning mechanisms. A series of surveys showed that citizens were cognizant of the pressure growth placed on the HMA's mobility situation. A 1976 study conducted for the Office of Public Transportation found that nearly fifty percent of Houstonians listed transportation as a serious problem, ranking it behind only utility rates and crime as the city's most pressing issues. The survey also showed that residents linked traffic directly to metropolitan growth. Despite making this link, most of the Houstonians surveyed felt that the growth should still be encouraged because its positives outweighed its associated complications. The survey also showed that residents knew of the city's efforts to confront transportation problems. Nearly 84 percent of respondents could name an active Office of Public Transportation initiative such as CarShare or high occupancy vehicle projects.<sup>16</sup> Officials took these responses as a sign that Houstonians were willing to support a system so long as it proved effective and could facilitate the city's growth.

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University Press, 2010); Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Tom Kiley, "The Transportation Issue in Harris County Today," Public Opinion Survey for the Office of Public Transportation, 1976, H-Transportation, 1976-1977 VF, HMRC, 1-4.

As officials laid the groundwork for a new system, they remained keenly aware that the HMA's political balance required a diversely marketed plan. The 1976 survey attested to this fact, with its conclusions urging transit officials to recognize that different segments of the population possessed divergent expectations for transit and mobility. In order to create an effective coalition, officials intended to frame mass transit in ways that appealed to this variety of expectations. Attuned to the stance white suburbanites took in the HARTA debate, the survey concluded that the "affluent, 'enlightened,' suburban segments" of the city represented the Houstonians who were "most interested in the issue of transportation, and most critical of efforts to date." Because officials understood this population to be more discerning and educated than working-class Houstonians, they argued that drawing support from this population would require an "ongoing outreach program...conveyed by means of a number of imaginative forums and techniques" that could convince suburbanites of the sagacity of transit. An entirely different approach needed to be taken to appeal to "those at the lower socio-economic strata," specifically those central city African American and ethnic Mexican citizens with lower incomes. These citizens, the survey claimed, would respond best to plans with "near-term service improvements, new buses and routes and other innovations expanding current public transit service" in their parts of the city. Promises of general congestion relief would entice upper and middle-class city residents of all races to support the system.<sup>17</sup>

To get citizens and their disparate visions for the city's mobility systems onto the same page with city officials, the city of Houston created the Transportation Advisory Group. This organ allowed citizens interested in shaping the city's transportation priorities to engage directly with the city. An Office of Public Transportation-produced newsletter, "TransPlan," published in both English and Spanish, documented the group's

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<sup>17</sup> Kiley, "The Transportation Issue in Harris County Today," 6.

actions between April 1977 and mid-1979. The newsletter's earliest issue made calls for participation from suburban and city residents alike and backed a system that addressed the needs of the entire HMA. The group acknowledged that many suburban Houstonians relied almost exclusively on cars for transportation, so they planned for a transit system that could draw drivers off the road and onto buses. At the same time, they argued that any new system needed to account for those without vehicles by making sure bus routes served the areas of the city where this population lived, mainly the lower-income East End and central city wards.<sup>18</sup>

Prominent African Americans and ethnic Mexicans expressed support for participation mechanisms like the Transportation Advocacy Group. They urged voters from their communities to embrace these systems and, in the process, built upon the coalition the two groups created when they expressed shared concerns about HARTA. Dr. Gurney Pearsall, an African American, lauded the Transportation Advocacy Group and other feedback measures as tools that allowed black and ethnic Mexican residents of Houston to help “shape the future transportation plan so that our specific concerns will be addressed.” Robert Rodrigues, an ethnic Mexican businessman, agreed with Pearsall and urged all Houstonians to see the transit discussion as a “time for each community to identify and vocalize its needs” for the new transportation system.<sup>19</sup> By legitimizing its public participation mechanisms, leaders from these two important political constituencies contributed to the growing momentum for a new plan. Answering the calls of community leaders and corroborating the conclusions of earlier citizen opinion surveys, dozens of citizens came to Transportation Advocacy Group meetings. These

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<sup>18</sup> Office of Public Transportation (OPT); Transportation Advisory Group (TAG), “TransPlan,” April 1977, Vol. 1, No. 1, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

<sup>19</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” August 1977, Vol. 2, No. 1, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

Houstonians brought with them their personal knowledge of the city's transportation situation and a plethora of ideas about how to improve it.<sup>20</sup>

### **METRO AND THE 1978 PLAN**

By the summer of 1977, the Office of Public Transportation and the city bus service, HouTran, had successfully implemented a number of transit improvements ranging from Park-and-Ride lots to contraflow lanes. Director Barry Goodman and other officials from the office believed these new assets proved to area residents that the city was serious about, and capable of building, an effective transportation system.<sup>21</sup> Using its growing services as justification, the Office of Public Transportation pushed the city of Houston to pursue the creation of a public transit authority. In August 1977, Mayor Hofheinz acted on the suggestion, announcing his intention to form an interim board that could campaign for passage of a countywide referendum and create an authority with taxing powers.<sup>22</sup> By October 1977, the proposed authority had a name: the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston and Harris County or METRO. Between METRO's formation and the release of its official plan in July 1978, citizens and officials worked together to form a proposal that would draw support from throughout the HMA.

During the earliest discussions of METRO, officials made it clear that they intended to include as much public input as possible in order to avoid the misunderstandings that derailed HARTA. In September 1977, Mayor Hofheinz called a public hearing to consider the first steps of creating a transportation authority. As he opened the meeting, Hofheinz told listeners that the Authority needed to “be of benefit to persons and property situated within” its boundaries and had to serve the “public interest”

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<sup>20</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” May 1977, Vol. 1, No. 2, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

<sup>21</sup> “Second Park and Ride Route to Open in May,” *Houston*, May 1977, HMRC, 38-42.

<sup>22</sup> “Creation of Mass Transit Panel Proposed by Hofheinz,” *Houston Post*, August 9, 1977, H-Transportation, 1976-1977 VF, HMRC.

above those of any single group.<sup>23</sup> As the previous surveys indicated they would, Houstonians applauded Hofheinz's action. The hearing brought a wide sample of citizens together and collected an almost unanimous show of support for a general transit system.

A few nagging questions did emerge at this meeting, revolving mostly around the Authority's potential boundaries and the position of suburban communities within the agency as compared to Houston. Most speakers at the hearing, including the mayor, attempted to gloss over these issues by insisting that in its final form METRO would cater to the entire HMA. Other officials echoed Hofheinz and downplayed potential geographic divisions. Warren Henry of the Houston Chamber of Commerce argued that success for transit would be ensured by a "system that is deserving of the support of the voices of this region." Henry lauded the broad-based efforts at citizen participation already put in as "democracy in action."<sup>24</sup> Beyond indicating that Houstonians recognized the merits of a metropolitan transportation system, calls for a HMA-wide system acknowledged the city-suburb balance in metropolitan politics since the HARTA vote.

Buoyed by the initial positive reception, the Office of Public Transportation and city moved forward by authorizing the formation of an interim METRO board on October 5, 1977.<sup>25</sup> METRO's enabling legislation gave the mayor of Houston the power to select five of the seven interim board members with the Harris County Commissioner's Court selecting the sixth for the unincorporated parts of Harris County, and the mayors of all non-Houston cities within Harris County selecting the seventh. Hofheinz made his selections with an eye toward building a coalition of support. He named leaders who could speak to "the black community, the Mexican-Americans, the urbanites, the suburbanites—all of Houston." Clearly, Hofheinz planned to use members

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<sup>23</sup> City of Houston, "METRO Public Hearing," September 27, 1977, Box 72, CHPSD, HMRC, 3-5.

<sup>24</sup> City of Houston, "METRO Public Hearing," 22.

<sup>25</sup> OPT; TAG, "TransPlan," October 1977, Vol. 2, No. 3, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

of the board to convince voters of every class and race to support the Authority. He appointed Albert Hopkins Sr., an African American pharmacy owner, and Frumencio Reyes, an ethnic Mexican lawyer and civic leader, to lead the push among the cities two largest minorities. Because he possessed a confrontational political history, Reyes could not be confirmed by the City Council so Hofheinz chose Ninfa Lorenzo, an ethnic Mexican restaurateur and one of the highest profile ethnic Mexican women in the city, to take his place.<sup>26</sup> Hofheinz' appointed three white men with his remaining selections. E.L. Oakes, a labor leader, would work with Houston's labor organizations and blue-collar workers in suburbs such as Pasadena. Howard Horne, a businessman and Houston Chamber of Commerce member, would chair the board. And John Butler Jr., another Houston-area business leader, would serve as well. The outlying cities and county court would add two more white men to the board—George DeMontrond, a north Houston car dealer and businessman; and William Black, the former mayor of suburban Deer Park.<sup>27</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce also acted as a mouthpiece for the Authority. The Chamber urged Houstonians to recognize that congestion and immobility were crippling problems, not simply inconveniences. The group highlighted what it saw as the democratic and transparent nature of the board itself. It also noted key differences between METRO and HARTA, such as the built-in checks on the board's authority and pre-determined dissolution dates if a referendum failed. Further, the Chamber reiterated that the METRO plan intended to bring a metropolitan solution to transportation problems. "Houston is a region, not just the nation's fifth most populous city...We are a

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<sup>26</sup> For more information on Ninfa Lorenzo see Chrystel Pit, "Deal With Us: The Business of Mexican Culture in Post-World War II Houston" (PhD Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> OPT; TAG, "TransPlan," January 1978, Vol. 3, No. 2, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

community of communities,” and the extent to which residents embraced METRO’s plan “will be a measure of their foresight.”<sup>28</sup>

Transportation Advocacy Group meetings continued throughout this process and the input solicited through the gatherings helped establish the parameters of the METRO proposal. Transportation Advocacy Group members insisted that easily implemented improvements remain the focus of the agency. Still wary of the risks attached to a massive public works project such as rail, the group urged incremental improvements that could ease congestion at low cost.<sup>29</sup> The sheer dimension of Houston’s mobility problems represented the biggest obstacle facing citizens and officials as they attempted to hash out plans for the proposed system. Despite agreement that numerous low-cost improvements could be made on area highways, “the best first step [was] not so easily identifiable.” For each sector of the city a number of project options existed. Should the first changes occur on Interstate 45? Or on Highway 290? Should new highways be built or the old ones improved?<sup>30</sup> Such questions captured the difficulty of resolving even generally agreed upon aspects of the METRO plan. Deeper divisions that revolved around how to pay for the system or about who would benefit from improvements sparked even greater debate.

With rough sketches of a new proposal in place, the superstructure of the Authority began to take shape. It quickly became obvious that only a dedicated tax could support such a massive entity. Hoping to disassociate the METRO proposal from the disastrous emissions tax plan of the HARTA vote, officials embraced a sales tax plan. Some critics, though, including incoming mayor Jim McConn, advocated an altered form of emissions tax because of its less regressive nature and its focus on the users of the

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<sup>28</sup> James Leach, “Regional Transit Planning Must Succeed,” *Houston*, November 1977, HMRC, 70.

<sup>29</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” November 1977, Vol. 2, No. 4, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

<sup>30</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” December 1977, Vol. 3, No. 1, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

roads.<sup>31</sup> A secondary discussion emerged around how to deal with the existing HouTran bus system and equipment. Some thought it best for METRO to take over the old system, while others advocated starting from scratch.<sup>32</sup> These debates—about what the mode and focus of early improvement efforts would be, how to pay for them, who could access it, and what would happen to the city’s existing transit system—shaped the plan released by the METRO board in July 1978. It advanced a three-stage, 20-year, \$3.1 billion regional transit program that would serve the entire HMA.<sup>33</sup> Continuing to promote the broad and inclusive approach taken during the crafting of the proposal, the cover of the plan trumpeted the fact that “the METRO board listened to planners, engineers, other transit professionals...and to thousands of Harris County residents,” as they outlined the program.<sup>34</sup> The same day that they released the plan, officials set a public referendum for August 12, 1978.<sup>35</sup>

METRO officials framed the authority as Houston’s only hope in dealing with the dual challenges of growth and increasing immobility. Echoing Mayor Hofheinz’s earlier focus on the perils of rampant expansion, the introduction to the plan concluded that while “regional growth patterns have already been influenced by one of the nation’s most outstanding transportation systems: the extensive freeway network,” the city’s ability to

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<sup>31</sup> “Study Shows Only Sales Tax Can Pay for Transit System,” *Houston Post*, December 26, 1977, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

<sup>32</sup> Terry Kliever “‘Agreed in Principle’ MTA to Pay City \$2.4 Million for HouTran,” *Houston Post*, August 3, 1978, H-MTA-1978 VF, HMRC; “Transit Authority Setting sights on HouTran,” *Houston Post*, January 13, 1978, H-Transportation, Jan-Apr 1978 VF, HMRC.

<sup>33</sup> “\$3.1 Billion Regional Transit System Keys Metro Proposal,” *Houston Post*, July 24, 1978, H-Transportation—1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC; Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston and Harris County (METRO), “Regional Transit Plan,” July 1978, MSS 074, Michael Berryhill Collection (MBC), Woodson Research Center (WRC), Rice University, 27.

<sup>34</sup> METRO, “Regional Transit Plan.”

<sup>35</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” June 1978, Vol. 1, No. 2, Folder 5, Box 64, CECC, SCLUH; “Board Favors August 12 Election,” H-Transportation-Apr-June 1978 VF, HMRC; “Aug. 12 Election on Transit Panel Gets McConn’s Ok,” *Houston Post*, June 20, 1978, H-Transportation-Apr-June 1978 VF, HMRC.



expand capacity was limited.<sup>36</sup> Many feared that any increases in congestion would cause a slowdown in economic growth, an outcome every Houstonian wanted to avoid at a time when the city was a rare bright spot at a moment of national recession. The proposal offered an independent, metropolitan-wide agency to take on the mounting problems of transportation and keep the city moving. Only the creation of such a “regional transit system will...meet the challenge of maintaining mobility while accommodating growth.”<sup>37</sup>

The interim board also trumpeted the efforts they went to during the formative stages of the plan to encourage public participation. Wanting to avoid the stigma of unchecked authority that negatively affected HARTA, METRO promoted the fact that it had held thirty official community meetings where more than 2,000 residents expressed their thoughts. More than simply acknowledging that these citizen voices had been heard, though, the METRO plan brought them to the fore. The 1978 proposal included a number of citizen recommendations drawn from the Transportation Advocacy Group meetings. By folding citizen thoughts into its founding document, the interim board showed that they were taking Houstonians views of mobility seriously, not simply collecting and ignoring citizens suggestions.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the plan called for the creation of a group called the Citizen Advisory Board, which would hold monthly meetings with the METRO board and advise them about user concerns.<sup>39</sup>

The plan consisted of three stages that reflected the mix of realism, hope, and caution that planners and the METRO board brought to the process. The first stage promised a continuation of the improvements that the city started to implement in

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<sup>36</sup> METRO, “Regional Transit Plan,” 2.

<sup>37</sup> METRO, “Regional Transit Plan,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> METRO, “Regional Transit Plan,” 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

previous years. Among these were expanded and timely bus service, more crosstown routes, improved bus maintenance facilities, expanded park-and-rides, and the instituting of carpooling, carsharing, and vanpooling systems. The second stage aimed to ease general congestion through a series of infrastructural improvements and more advanced traffic management practices. This revolved mainly around the construction of high occupancy vehicle (two or more passengers) and contraflow lanes on area highways, but also covered improving traffic light systems on main arterials and making grade separation improvements at some of the city's most congested intersections. Finally, the third stage in the proposed plan, which was the most ambitious and the most long-term, called for construction of dedicated, separated transitways on most major highways. According to the plan these routes would begin as dedicated busways, before transitioning to rail or other larger capacity transit systems when ridership merited such a shift.<sup>40</sup>

METRO officials' attempts to cater to the HMA's various political constituencies clearly shaped the final proposal. The slow, cautious approach of the first two stages reflected official fears that too ambitious of a plan might result in a rejection by voters. The plan offered something for both city and suburban voters. The bus system and grade separation improvements aimed to satisfy the demands of intra-city transit users—mostly lower-income African Americans and ethnic Mexicans who did not own cars, but, increasingly, a population that included a number of white-collar Houstonians who commuted by bus from wealthier, predominantly white suburbs to the north and northwest of the city. The high occupancy vehicle lanes, park-and-rides, and contraflow lanes appealed to commuters. White working-class suburbanites applauded METRO's lackluster discussion of non-road mass transit because most maintained their dislike of

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<sup>40</sup> METRO, "Regional Transit Plan," 8-26.

this option. The participation and feedback channels put in place by the Transportation Advocacy Group and those proposed by the Citizen Advisory Board also demonstrated the agency's commitment to avoid characterizations of METRO as an unresponsive, untouchable bureaucracy. Finally, in an attempt to assuage suspicions that Houston would dominate the Authority, METRO officials made it clear that the system would serve the entire HMA.

**“NO TRANSPORTATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION”: BUILDING A CONSTITUENCY<sup>41</sup>**

In the summer of 1978 with the plan circulating, the interim METRO board and its supporters shifted their attention to garnering support for the Authority. As the details of the plan made clear, white-collar commuters from throughout the HMA, African Americans, and ethnic Mexicans were the primary focuses of this drive. The METRO board approached each group with a different set of selling points. When speaking with African Americans and ethnic Mexicans, the board linked the METRO program with job creation, political access, and improved mobility in the city's core. When talking with white-collar car commuters both inside and outside the city limits, the board highlighted the economic promise the initiative brought to the whole region and focused on the mobility improvements it planned for drivers.

Unlike the HARTA campaign, where mostly white city officials and prominent transit proponents tried to secure the backing of community leaders from the African American and ethnic Mexican communities, during the METRO push the board tasked members Ninfa Lorenzo and Albert Hopkins Sr. with winning over the two important constituencies. Lorenzo and Hopkins did more than discuss the plan with the leaders from the two groups. They engaged with the public through the Transportation Advocacy

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<sup>41</sup> OPT; TAG, “TransPlan,” May 1977, Vol. 1, No. 2, Box 64, Folder 5, CECC, SCLUH.

Group meetings and held public information sessions throughout the city. Lorenzo also adroitly secured the backing of prominent minority-owned media outlets and employed the pages of *El Sol*, an ethnic Mexican newspaper based in the Second Ward, to tout the merits and need for METRO to the newspaper's readers.<sup>42</sup>

To woo suburbanites, the board pushed the fact that the more incorporated cities that voted for METRO, the greater their representation would be on the inaugural board. With allies in several of the enclave cities—communities such as Bellaire that were completely surrounded by Houston—and suburban board members stumping for the program throughout Harris County, the board believed they had a good chance to convince suburban voters to support METRO.

The referendum election pushed transit officials to engage with Houstonians over transportation and to project their own ideas about the politics of mobility. This time, though, officials would aim to reconstruct the fragile alliance that derailed HARTA in 1973 and put it to use in their favor. During the campaign the board experienced great success among the city's minority populations, but continued to flounder in attempts to gather broad suburban support. Whether they could strike and maintain a balance between large slices of the two coveted constituencies, while still holding on to supporters in the city, would prove to be the difference between a second straight defeat for transit and a resounding, metropolitan victory.

Despite going to great lengths to avoid many of the criticisms Houstonians leveled at the HARTA plan, METRO still faced significant opposition. The Authority's proposed powers of eminent domain and taxation, its service area projections, and its structure proved particularly problematic. Even before the release of the full METRO proposal, some suburban mayors resurrected the rhetoric of the HARTA debate and

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<sup>42</sup> On *El Sol* and other ethnic Mexican media outlets see Pit, "Deal with Us."

began throwing barbs in the direction of the Authority. Mayor John Harrison, of suburban Pasadena, rehashed a refrain commonly heard during the 1973 campaign when he insisted that “what’s good for Houston is not necessarily good for the suburban cities.” To Harrison, any tax dollars his community put into the METRO coffers would benefit Houston and not Pasadena, reason enough for his city to reject a the Authority.<sup>43</sup> Harrison was not alone in his skepticism toward the METRO plan.

The Tax Research Association of Houston and Harris County also criticized the plan with arguments that echoed those against HARTA and some that applied directly to the new proposal. It attacked the eminent domain powers the Authority would be vested with, calling them unnecessarily expansive.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the group argued that Houstonians would not abandon their cars to use a transit system, making it unlikely that ridership would be high enough to merit creation. These realities, the association contended, made any attempt to build a system a wasteful sink for public money. The association also repackaged Mayor Harrison’s Houston-centric criticism, broadening it as an attack of the entire notion of a metropolitan government. “District government is a bad system...inconsistent with the representative system” that would install appointed bureaucrats “beyond the reach of the voters” and be “unresponsive to the public.” Suburban leaders and interest groups throughout America employed a similar line of argument during the 1970s while trying to avoid forms of government that tied them to central cities through taxation or metropolitan authorities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Houston’s Blocking Transit Plan; Suburban leaders Mixed on Future,” *Houston Post*, June 18, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-Apr-June VF, HMRC.

<sup>44</sup> TRAHH, “Election to Create Area Transit Authority on August 12, 1978,” H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC, 2.

<sup>45</sup> TRAHH, “Election to Create Area Transit Authority,” 2. Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Self, *American Babylon*; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*. Some suburbanites resisted government authorities like METRO in other cities because of fears of abuse of power. Louise Nelson Dyble, *Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, and the Golden Gate Bridge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

Unlike the HARTA debate, however, some suburban leaders backed the METRO plan. Interim METRO board member and mayor of Deer Park, Bill Black, worked hard for the plan in Houston's suburbs. Likewise, Katy Mayor Dan Cox jumped to the METRO side of the debate and argued that suburban cities needed to do all they could to support the economic viability of Houston because the health of the city was attached to the health of the suburbs.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the backing of leaders like Cox and Black, the proposed Authority had the strong endorsement of leaders from enclave cities such as Bellaire and West University Place. These non-Houston supporters gave METRO officials hope that the initiative would succeed. Officials particularly coveted enclave support, knowing that passage of the referendum within these communities would demonstrate that, at least in Houston, a mandate for improved transportation existed.

The involvement of prominent ethnic Mexican leaders like Dr. Héctor García, president of the statewide Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations and founder of the American G.I. Forum, and Houston state representative Ben Reyes showed that ethnic Mexican Houstonians throughout the HMA viewed the METRO debate as an opportunity to improve the quality of life for Houstonians of Mexican origin. As they had during the HARTA debate, at the outset of the METRO discussion many ethnic Mexicans doubted that a transit plan would benefit them either in terms of service provision or employment. Only after METRO officials met with leaders like García and Reyes and assured them that planned improvements and expanded transit routes would be geared toward all Houstonians and that jobs and construction contracts would come to ethnic Mexicans did these leaders give the plan their endorsement.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "Houston' Blocking Transit Plan," *Houston Post*, June 18, 1978.

<sup>47</sup> "PASO Will Back Mass Transit Plan, But Says Promises Must be Fulfilled," *Houston Chronicle*, July 31, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC; "MTA Takes Sidetrip for Chicano Support," *Houston Post*, July 30, 1978 H-Transportation-1978-July Aug VF; "PASO Endorses Creation of Transit Plan," *El Sol*, August 3, 1978, HMRC; METRO, "Regional Transit Plan," 9.

African American leaders like U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and state representative Mickey Leland also elicited promises of minority hiring and service to predominantly black neighborhoods prior to expressing their support. Jordan urged voters to “help initiate a new era by voting for the transit plan,” and touted the access the system could provide to jobs throughout the HMA. Leland critiqued the Authority’s proposed sales tax, which he correctly labeled as regressive, but also admitted that access to transit was so important to his constituents that it was time “to bite the bullet” and accept the tax.<sup>48</sup> These officials broadcast their support by lending their images to METRO advertisement run in black newspapers.<sup>49</sup> (Figure 5.1) Other ads featured a diverse collection of Houstonians expressing their appreciation of the pre-METRO system improvements such as more comfortable seats and fewer delays. Such ads implied that these changes would continue under METRO.<sup>50</sup> The Authority’s openness to citizen feedback and the support of key elected officials pushed hesitant voters and groups to endorse the plan. Despite lingering concerns, after African American politicians announced their support, a number of black religious groups did as well.

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<sup>48</sup> “LULAC, 7 Black Leaders Support MTA,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 27, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC.

<sup>49</sup> METRO Advertisement, *Houston Informer*, August 5, 1978, HMRC; METRO Advertisement, *Houston Forward Times*, August 12, 1978, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (DBCAH).

<sup>50</sup> A number of advertisements appeared on the pages of the *Houston Informer* in the lead up to the election. See, June 24, 1978, and July 1, 1978 issues, HMRC.



Figure 5.1: METRO Advertisement

This advertisement, run in the *Houston Informer* two days before the METRO vote, trumpeted the endorsement of local black politicians Anthony Hall, Senfronia Thompson, Mickey Leland, and Andrew Jefferson. *Houston Informer*, August 5, 1978, HMRC.

While the Black Organization for Leadership Development and the Houston Pastors and Ministers Fellowship remained wary that an unelected board could easily rescind earlier promises, they also recognized that “40,000 black folks are dependent daily on transit” for reaching places of employment, school, and recreation and felt that the METRO plan at least offered these Houstonians improved service.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to running advertisements for the approval of METRO, African American newspapers ran several editorials asking readers to support the referendum. A *Houston Forward Times* article published prior to the referendum announced the

<sup>51</sup> “Black Leaders Temper MTA Endorsements,” *Houston Post*, August 5, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF.



newspaper's endorsement of METRO. The newspaper appreciated the fact that "the METRO plan places immediate and heavy emphasis on expanding and improving the present bus service," and intended to direct this improvement toward "the inner-city." Further, the editors of the *Forward Times* told Houston's African American population to "take a special interest in the August 12 election" because "we will be voting for an issue that will affect out way of life—our very survival—for years to come."<sup>52</sup>

METRO's willingness to meet ethnic Mexican and African American community groups on their turf during the campaign and their inclusion of citizen feedback into the plan itself helped secure support. The level of citizen input into the METRO plan dwarfed that solicited during the campaign to create HARTA. Citizens were cognizant that the Authority was listening to their concerns. In one *El Sol* article explaining the terms of the debate, the author lauded METRO for interviewing a "large number of residents...about the direction of this new project" and questioning them about what improvements they hoped to see in the new plan.<sup>53</sup>

The interim Authority convinced citizens of the sincerity of these outreach efforts by putting citizen suggestions into action. Just two months before the vote, the Office of Transportation's Barry Goodman stood in east Houston to announce the inauguration of minibus service to the East End and Third Ward, two predominantly minority communities. Discussing the new routes, Goodman acknowledged that citizen participation had influenced his office and METRO's plans. "Both of these [minibus] services are aimed at meeting a distinct need that has been a called to our attention by residents" of the two communities.<sup>54</sup> By implementing programs in direct response to the

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<sup>52</sup> "Houston Needs MTA," *Houston Forward Times*, July 29, 1978, DBCAH.

<sup>53</sup> "Houston ante la Posibilidad de un Nuevo Medio de Transporte." (Houston and the Possibility of a New Mode of Transit.), *El Sol*, July 20, 1978, HMRC, 2, translated by the author.

<sup>54</sup> "Two New Services in Transit," *El Sol*, June 8, 1978, 2, HMRC.

demands of citizens, transit officials demonstrated their commitment to improving mobility throughout the city.

Ethnic Mexican Houstonians celebrated the political empowerment they felt during the METRO debate. *El Sol* editorials and articles noted that the debate expanded the role ethnic Mexicans played in city politics. In article after article published in the weeks prior to the referendum, the newspaper marked each new endorsement from a community organization as an indication of the population's growing political power. The paper framed the active support of ethnic Mexican groups from across the political spectrum as a significant statement of unity in the community. When the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations endorsed the plan, *El Sol* asserted that their move represented "the frosting on the cake of the growing political awareness and clout" of Houston's ethnic Mexican population.<sup>55</sup> When the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, a Houston-based organization of ethnic Mexican businessmen, expressed support after a meeting with Lorenzo, the newspaper claimed that it demonstrated the "power of the large Hispanic community of Houston."<sup>56</sup>

In a piece written in support of METRO two days before the referendum, Ninfa Lorenzo both connected the system to the broader political power of the city's ethnic Mexicans and noted the improvements it would bring to the daily lives of citizens. Reflecting back on the planning and community input processes, Lorenzo asserted that the METRO board "has addressed itself to what the community wants and, more importantly, what the community needs." This engagement with the community's mobility expectations, she argued, was a result of citizen protests against being "excluded from the planning stage and the subsequent development steps of programs that affect us

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<sup>55</sup> "Mexican-American Forces Endorse MTA," *El Sol*, August 3, 1978, HMRC, 2.

<sup>56</sup> "Endorsement," *El Sol*, August 3, 1978, HMRC, 2.

the most.” Laurenzo lauded the ethnic Mexican community for acting as one interest group and displaying “a critical and progressive level of social and political maturity.” She asked, that as voters, they not let those gains disappear. She encouraged readers to go to the polls on August 12 to “speak out as a community and demonstrate our concerns and our responsibility” by voting for the creation of METRO.<sup>57</sup>

A cartoon published in *El Sol* the same day as Laurenzo’s editorial reinforced many of her points. The comic, drawn by Alfonzo Vazquez, juxtaposed two ethnic Mexican men. The first, intended to represent either a working-class ethnic Mexican or a recent Mexican immigrant, was clearly the butt of the joke. He wore a t-shirt that proclaimed “I do not vote” in Spanish, rode a stressed-out donkey, and suggested to his “compadre” that his burro, not the bus he was about to board, was the answer to his, and Houston’s, transportation problem. The second man, dressed in a suit, looked back at the man in exasperation, clearly disregarded his advice, and boarded the bus, which was plastered with pro-METRO campaign materials. The cartoon was loaded with meanings. First, it critiqued ethnic Mexicans who did not support METRO as backward and comically, if not dangerously, anti-modern. Such people, the comic suggested, damaged the reputation of all of Houston’s ethnic Mexicans with their boorish behavior. Not only was the man a buffoon for riding a donkey, but he proclaimed that he would not vote, an even more damning fact for readers of *El Sol* who so celebrated their access to the franchise and their growing influence over city politics. With this line of commentary, the comic echoed Laurenzo’s call for voter turnout and reconfirmed the importance of the ethnic Mexican electorate. Second, the cartoon hinted at the economic benefits the creation of METRO could provide. “Your jobs depend on transportation,” a poster on the front of the bus proclaimed. The statement could be read as a reference to the

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<sup>57</sup> Ninfa Laurenzo, “MTA and Its Importance to Houston Hispanics,” *El Sol*, August 10, 1978, HMRC, 1.

maintenance, driver, and administrative jobs that were promised to ethnic Mexicans during the METRO campaign or as a reminder of the fact that many ethnic Mexicans were literally dependent on transit to reach their workplaces throughout the HMA. Either way the message was clear—vote for METRO or risk hurting the members of the ethnic Mexican community who would have found, or kept, employment because of METRO. Finally, the donkey, and the suggestion that a four-legged ride might be an easier way to navigate the city’s gridlocked traffic, was a reminder of the growing immobility facing the HMA.<sup>58</sup> (Figure 5.2)

As the day of the election drew near, *El Sol* continued its full-court press on readers by running one final endorsement—its own. Echoing Lorenzo, the paper laid out the importance of the debate to both the HMA and to the standing of minority voters within it. Declaring that most suburbanites perceived of transit as a service for “the black, the Mexican-American and the poor white communities within the inner city,” the paper explained that combining the votes of city residents were key to the Authority’s creation.

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<sup>58</sup> Alfonso Vazquez, illustrator, “Vote for METRO” Comic, *El Sol*, August 10, 1978, HMRC, 3A.



Figure 5.2: *El Sol* METRO Cartoon

This cartoon ran the day before the METRO referendum and suggested to Houston's ethnic Mexicans that in order to be forward thinking they needed to support the Authority. *El Sol*, August 10, 1978, HMRC, 3.

While this perspective generalized the opinions of white suburbanites and dismissed the support some municipalities and many individuals expressed for METRO, it also echoed the arguments forwarded by some critics who worried the Authority would not serve them. By pointing out the need to counterbalance these voters, the newspaper hoped to spur turnout beyond white Houstonians. The editorial further asserted that an alliance between blacks, ethnic Mexicans, and working-class whites within the city could create a formidable political bloc that city officials would have to take seriously, but pointed out

that such a group would have to display that power via the METRO vote. The newspaper noted that voters from these groups “pulling together can determine the outcome of the election or any election in Harris County and most certainly in Houston.” Just as Lorenzo had in her editorial, *El Sol* urged voters to support the referendum as a way to improve regional mobility and to consolidate minority political power.<sup>59</sup> Such suggestions of interracial coalition building took the loose voting alliance of the HARTA vote further and sought to formalize connections. While it became increasingly obvious by the end of the METRO debate that working-class suburban whites would not be joining Houston’s black and ethnic Mexican populations in a political alliance, working-class and middle-class whites within Houston did act on these calls, as Chapter Six will explore in more detail.

Suburbanites and central city African American and ethnic Mexican voters were not the only groups wooed by METRO officials, of course. Two other key constituencies cultivated by the board and generally supportive of the transit plan were a majority of white residents from Houston and residents of the HMA who, for quite some time, had advocated for mass transit. White Houstonians, of course, did not possess the same ideas about transit, but having faced nearly two decades of slowly worsening traffic on city highways, a larger majority agreed that the Authority might offer some form of relief. Since both groups at least tacitly backed the METRO plan from the beginning, neither received as much attention as suburbanites or African American and ethnic Mexican communities. Yet the pitch the board directed toward these groups, and, more significantly, the campaigning carried out by the pro-transit Houstonians separate from that of the board, illustrates key strategies in the push to convince all Houstonians that the referendum needed to pass.

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<sup>59</sup> “Vote for MTA,” *El Sol*, August 10, 1978, HMRC, 2.

In discussions with white voters in the city, METRO supporters recycled many of the same rationales offered to suburban whites. The roads would be less congested; the HMA's economy would grow; Houston would secure its position as a world-class city. METRO proponents warned that Houston, "the nation's fastest growing metropolitan area," was "starting to choke on its own success" and argued that only a mass transit system could adequately address the problem.<sup>60</sup> These arguments resonated with Houstonians long invested in improving the city. The METRO board recognized that while this group was not the most likely to use a public transit system, they would embrace the peripheral benefits it could bring them, and most essentially, be the ones who would vote. Hoping to ensure that this demographic would come to polling places on the 12th, and echoing the warnings *El Sol* and the *Forward Times* offered, a Chamber of Commerce newsletter cautioned white residents that "the real danger to this worthwhile proposal does not seem to be voter opposition so much as voter apathy."<sup>61</sup>

Disappointed by the HARTA defeat and the subsequent delay it caused, transit backers, a loose collection of white environmentalists from groups like the Citizens' Environmental Coalition, political and social organizations like the League of Women Voters, and Houstonians concerned about the development problems facing the city, worked diligently to promote the new plan, often rebroadcasting and building upon the arguments forwarded by the METRO board. Forming an action group called Citizens for Better Transit, these Houstonians focused a great deal of their attention on the metropolitan nature of transportation decisions and on the environmental benefits of mass transit. Echoing earlier official statements and speaking directly to suburban neighbors, Citizens for Better Transit argued that "transit problems and needs do not stop at City

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<sup>60</sup> Citizens for Better Transit (CBT), "Speaker's Guide," 1978, H-Transportation-1970-1974 VF, HMRC.

<sup>61</sup> John H. Crooker, Jr., "Transit," *Houston*, July 1978, HMRC, 60.

Lines. The future of every community, every neighborhood in Harris County is at stake. The day we no longer can get around is the day we cease to grow, to prosper.” The group countered suburban criticisms of onerous taxation by asserting that sharing the tax burden would lighten the hit to any one group or municipality: “we share the burden; we share the benefits.”<sup>62</sup>

Joining with national campaigns that aimed to address issues of air pollution by cutting back on automobile use or supporting the implementation of stricter pollution controls on vehicles such as catalytic converters, Citizens for Better Transit offered the most comprehensive environmental rationale for implementing the transit plan. Moving beyond figures of traffic levels and the number of new cars added, the group noted that the real toll of congestion was taken on the city’s air quality. The 120,450 additional cars that came to Houston’s streets each year certainly caused congestion, but more ominously and invisibly, they added 30,623 tons of pollutants to the air. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, this pollution cost the city \$25 million a year in “damage to our health, crops, material and property values.” Greater reliance on automobiles also meant more use of fossil fuels. Having just emerged from the crippling oil crisis, many Americans remained wary of the fragile existence fostered by dependence on oil. Citizens for Better Transit estimated that METRO’s plan would save energy resources, lower air pollution, and save Houstonians money.<sup>63</sup> To them, this made the right choice obvious.

In the final weeks before the vote, the board and supporters attempted to address the remaining questions about METRO. Responding to those worried about the appointed, rather than elected, nature of the board, officials responded that a non-elected

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<sup>62</sup> CBT, Speakers Guide for 1978 Election, H-Transportation-1970-1974 Vertical File, HMRC.

<sup>63</sup> CBT, Flyer “Energy and Environment,” H-MTA-1979-July-Dec, HMRC.



board removed politics from “decisions such as where to put a bus shelter, how close a bus route should come to any particular person’s house, whether to put an overpass over this railroad crossing.” Such decisions, the city claimed, “should be determined objectively...with a businesslike eye on results, not votes.” Responding to the backseat planners, those with plans of their own, officials gently chided: “each of us goes somewhere in Harris County each day. Each of us is a transit expert. Each of us know some improvement that needs to be made...but remember: a lot of people put this plan together.”<sup>64</sup> The message from the interim board and city officials was clear: the plan is solid, the plan is vetted, and you should support it. In its final editorial before the vote, the *Houston Post* echoed the thoughts of city officials. It told readers the referendum would provide an answer to whether residents wanted to bring “Mass or Mess?” to the city. There were a number of factors to consider, the paper admitted, but, in the end, there was “only one practical, sensible, forward-looking choice. We must vote for mass transit.”<sup>65</sup>

The METRO board worked for months to build support for their plan. They elicited citizen feedback, developed arguments aimed at particular groups, and added protections and guarantees to the plan to appease the voters they most coveted. This strategy demonstrated the changing political landscape of the city and the attention officials paid to those shifts. Learning from HARTA’s defeat and the outcomes of the Harrisburg Freeway fight, officials knew they could not afford to ignore minority voters. Likewise, to entice suburban voters, they framed the program as one for the entire metropolitan area, not Houston alone. Officials believed that this diverse approach would ensure the referendum’s passage. On August 12 voters cast their ballots. The results

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<sup>64</sup> “Metro Questions,” Box 33, Folder 7, CHPSD, HMRC.

<sup>65</sup> “Mass or Mess?” *Houston Post*, August 12, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC.

would show the efficacy of this campaign and test the strength of minority power in both the city's mobility debates and the larger political sphere.

### **THE VOTE**

On August 12, 1978, some 231 residents from the tiny suburban community of El Lago approved METRO by a single vote—116 to 115. In Jersey Village, the results broke the other way. Out of the 233 voters, 117 voted METRO down, beating 116 supporters by a single vote. The razor thin margin and opposite outcomes in the results of these two suburban cities spoke to a split among suburban voters over the need for the Authority. Despite a lack of cohesion, a large enough minority of suburban voters supported the referendum that combined with the votes of a majority of Houstonians, voters moved the HMA into to the transit business for the first time.

Voters in the twenty-three incorporated cities at least partially within Harris County, and those from the five districts that made up the unincorporated remainder of the county, cast ballots on August 12. Houston, which, for the purposes of the vote, included its enclave cities, passed the referendum by a nearly 16,000-vote margin, 63,510 to 47,596. The results outside of Houston reflected a continued hesitancy toward transit in working-class suburbs and those areas to which METRO offered no immediate services. Of the twenty-two incorporated Harris County cities and five unincorporated sections of the county, a minority of nine approved the Authority. This contingent was led by Friendswood to the north of Houston, Missouri City to the southwest, Katy to the northwest, and the North Harris County unincorporated area. All four of these locations were among the metropolitan area's fastest growing and most desirous of easier mobility. Of the fifteen entities that rejected METRO, the working-class suburbs of Pasadena, Deer Park, and South Houston did so by the largest margins. The final regional tally was

80,219 for and 65,883 against, with 12 percent of the electorate, average for a countywide election, casting a vote.<sup>66</sup>

The results reflected the divisions apparent during the campaign, but also demonstrated how political lines had shifted in the city since 1973. In the HARTA campaign, a similar proportion of suburban voters rejected the system, and, joined by African American and ethnic Mexican voters, doomed that proposal. On METRO's go-round, hesitant working-class suburban voters stood alone, as the city's black and ethnic Mexican voters felt assured that METRO would meet their mobility needs. For the second straight transportation election black and ethnic Mexican voters played a prominent role in the outcome. In addition, the fact that a minority of suburban voters supported the referendum provided METRO with an ostensibly metropolitan mandate and inaugurated one of the HMA's earliest and most powerful metropolitan governance bodies. The city and its now-fully-employed transit officials hoped that METRO would grow to have a strong presence in the HMA over the coming years. The results of the vote encouraged officials to maintain the balanced approach between city and suburbs. Officials also quickly realized that passage of the vote would not mean an end to opposition or the victory of any one groups' idea about the politics of mobility.

The election results determined the structure of the METRO board and shaped the Authority's service area. With only a few suburban areas approving the Authority, the board's makeup would remain the same as before the election. It would consist of seven people—five appointed by the mayor of Houston, one by the Harris County commissioners, and one by the mayors of the participating suburbs. In terms of service area, the Authority would eventually bring transit to every approving entity, practicing “a closed-door policy” in those areas that rejected the proposal. This meant that even if a

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<sup>66</sup> 1978 Referendum results available at Houston City Secretary's Office, Box Election Misc. 1922-1984.

route crossed through a non-participating community on its way to a part of the service area beyond it, buses could not stop to pick up or drop off passengers. Communities that rejected the proposal could join the Authority in the future if they passed enabling legislation. If abstaining cities joined the Authority, the METRO board would grow in proportion, to a maximum of eleven members. After choosing to join the Authority, though, communities were bound to remain within it unless state law changed membership protocols. METRO officials were confident that within a few years of service those who voted against its creation would be clamoring to join.<sup>67</sup>

Many commentators remarked that the timing of METRO's approval, in the midst of nation wide tax revolt, spoke to the depth of the city's mobility problem and the resolve of area voters to address it. One *Houston Post* columnist chalked up the results of the vote to Houston's tradition of biting the bullet and embracing necessary improvements, "even if there was a price tag attached." Almost every commentator noted the importance of the coalescence of black, ethnic Mexican, and white voters into a winning constituency.<sup>68</sup> For many, the voter breakdown mattered much less than the simple fact that METRO now existed. Whereas a week earlier Houston "had a huge traffic problem and no machinery to deal with" it, upon passage of METRO "the machinery" was in place, "thanks to citizens who rose to the occasion" and supported the plan.<sup>69</sup> Ninfa Lorenzo feted supporters with "margaritas and a mariachi band" at her Navigation Boulevard restaurant. For Lorenzo, the night was a "double victory" with

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<sup>67</sup> John Kling, "The Question of Mass Transit," *Houston Chronicle*, July 30, 1978, H-Traffic-1950-1979 VF, HMRC.

<sup>68</sup> "Transit Victory Shows Strength of this Area," *Houston Post*, August 15, 1978.

<sup>69</sup> "Transit Victory Shows Strength of this Area," *Houston Post*, August 15, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC.

METRO's successful creation and "an impressive showing of Mexican-American vote-getting," each counting as major accomplishments.<sup>70</sup>

The results within Houston highlighted METRO's patchwork constituency. Election results showed that African American voters from every economic level approved METRO, with middle and upper class African Americans overwhelmingly supporting the system. The same pattern held true for ethnic Mexican voters. Middle and upper class whites represented both the largest slice of voters and passed the referendum by the largest margin, reaching nearly a 70-30 breakdown in support. While working- and poor Houstonians from all racial backgrounds were more hesitant to support the system, with margins of approval hovering around the 51-49 range, the results were most likely close because of a less than 10 percent turnout rate among the group.<sup>71</sup>

While leading black and ethnic Mexican campaigners acknowledged that turnout was low among their constituencies, they argued that the METRO campaign had helped increase political discussion and awareness of issues, even if it did not actually cause an uptick in voting. An editorial in *El Sol* proclaimed that it was "gratifying to see that the Hispanic community of Houston is slowly becoming more sophisticated in its grappling with issues." Rather than simply voting along party lines or following the advice of a single leader, the METRO vote demonstrated that the community was increasingly "striving to decide on them [votes] on the basis of their merit." Concluding, and defending the role of ethnic Mexicans in the victory, the paper argued that the readers

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<sup>70</sup> "Supporters Toast Apparent Victory," *Houston Post*, August 13, 1978, H-Transportation-1978-July-Aug VF, HMRC.

<sup>71</sup> "No Single Bloc of Voters Brought Metro Win Home," *Houston Post*, August 13, 1978, H-Transportation-Sep-Dec-1978 VF, HMRC; "Mexico-Americans Dieron Su Apoyo" (Mexican-American Give Their Support," *El Sol*, August 17, 1978, HMRC, 1, translated by author; "Mexican Americans, Affluent Whites Strongest fro MTA," *El Sol*, August 17, 1978, HMRC, 1.

“should see the steps being taken and mark well the milestones reached,” but also insisted that they, and other Houstonians, needed to hold METRO to its promises.<sup>72</sup>

Opponents of METRO were quiet in the days after the referendum. Those communities that rejected the proposal felt they had dodged a bullet of taxation and opponents of the system within the city announced that they would monitor the performance of the fledgling Authority, giving notice that they refused to relinquish their own views of the politics of mobility.

## CONCLUSION

Like the HARTA vote before it, the 1978 decision to create METRO followed an unexpected path. The loose coalition of blacks, white working-class suburbanites, and ethnic Mexican Houstonians who had voted together to reject HARTA, reconfigured itself in 1978 as wealthier white suburbanites replaced their working class neighbors. To black and ethnic Mexican leaders like Mickey Leland and Ninfa Lorenzo, the role that their constituencies played in the creation of METRO proved their indispensable position within metropolitan politics. The vote was the second successful foray of these groups into transportation debates and convinced many, like the author of the *El Sol* article written in the days before the election, that black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians could form a potent political constituency in the future. If they incorporated working-class and middle-class white residents from within Houston into a coalition, such a bloc would represent a formidable political voice in city and metropolitan politics, one that could protect and project city residents' interests onto debates about transportation and a host of other issues.

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<sup>72</sup> “Editorial, MTA Victory,” *El Sol*, August 17, 1978, HMRC, 2.

Not all Houstonians understand the creation of METRO as a political watershed, however. Many framed the Authority's approval as an opportunity for the city to extricate itself from increasing immobility or saw its embrace of mass transit as an important sign that Houston could choose new forms of growth and mobility. Others, mainly suburban opponents of its creation, continued to view the Authority as a colossal waste of money and as an abusive agency of an overly powerful central city. No matter how Houstonians understood the METRO vote, its contestation had provided residents of the HMA with yet another opportunity to use transportation debates as a means to assert broader political and social expectations into metropolitan discussions.

In its first years of operation METRO faced a number of problems that slowed the implementation of its systems and opened the agency up to criticism. Opponents of METRO seized upon the Authority's operational difficulties in order to convince residents throughout the HMA that transit was taking the city in the wrong direction. Accusing METRO of financial mismanagement and criticizing its service failures, opponents drummed up popular opposition to the Authority. METRO survived this early storm and improved its services by 1980. But metropolitan demographics and politics continued to shift and Houston's relatively peaceful metropolitan equilibrium broke into broader conflicts as suburb-city tensions and disagreements among residents of different economic and racial categories boiled over. These disputes manifested in a 1983 transportation debate with METRO once again at its center. The results of this debate would reshape the HMA and shuffle the locus of political power for decades to come.

## **Chapter Six**

### **By Road or By Rail?**

### **The 1983 Transit Debate**

Returning to the 1983 public forum that opened this dissertation, we can now better contextualize its meaning within Houstonians' shifting understandings of mobility. Coming five years after the creation of METRO, the forum, and the broader discussion it was a part of, occurred at the same time that the Authority's suburban constituency was fracturing. That night at St. Patrick's Catholic Church, a divided citizenry from across the HMA debated the merits of proposals for the Harris County Toll Road Authority (HCTRA) and METRO's heavy rail system. Planning for both systems began in 1979 and the debate around them dominated metropolitan politics between 1980 and 1983. Local officials placed the final decision in the hands of HMA voters through two referenda: the first in June 1983 would consider METRO's proposal and the second in September 1983 would deal with the HCTRA plan. The level of citizen input that went into the proposals reflected the influence the two-decade struggle over transportation issues had given Houstonians in metropolitan debates.

Amid the crowd at the church, a white Catholic priest held a hand-painted sign aloft that read, "Surely, Houston, more imagination than another 20-mile parking lot."<sup>1</sup> (Figure 6.1) The message not only conveyed many Houstonians' doubts that more roads could solve the city's congestion problems, it also hinted at the deeper stakes of the 1983 debates. The priest, a member of a citywide, multi-racial, interfaith community organization called The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), was there with several dozen fellow members to advocate for the rail plan. TMO turned out in such force because its

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<sup>1</sup> Clipping, *Northeast News*, April 26, 1983, Central Chancery Files (CCF), Archives of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston (AAGH), Houston, Texas.

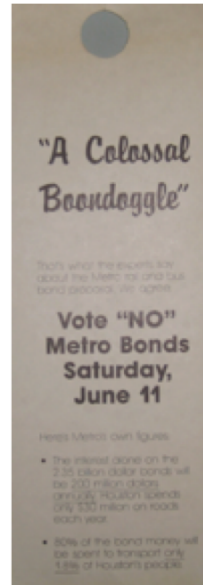
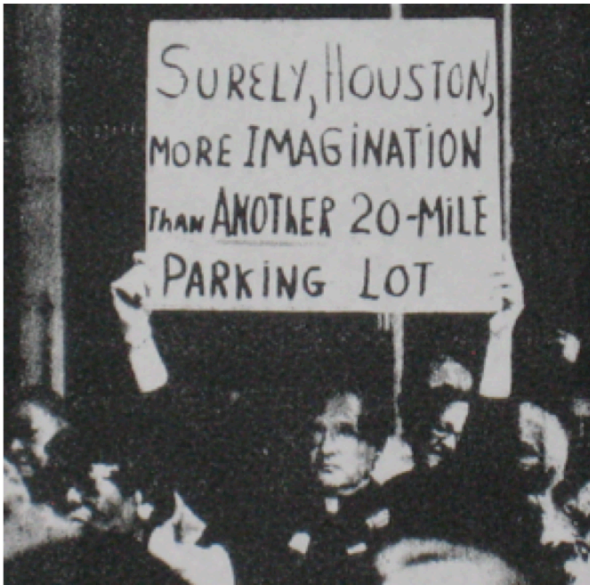


membership voted to make transportation issues, especially the fight against the toll road, a priority. For many members, including dozens who lived within the corridor that housed key parts of each proposed system, the debate revolved around protecting their homes, not transportation. TMO, though, was not the only party weighing in on the issue. For more than two years the organization and other pro-rail Houstonians had debated a population of mostly white suburban Houstonians and elected officials who supported toll roads. This group believed the roads would provide for suburban mobility and growth. Moreover, most remained wary of METRO and its mass transit plans. Prior to the referenda, pro-toll road citizens blanketed the HMA with door hangers and mailings calling METRO's plan, "A Colossal Boondoggle," and urging Houstonians to "Vote no [on] METRO Bonds...Don't be fooled by more empty promises."<sup>2</sup> (Figure 6.2) These opposing groups and the tense atmosphere of the public forum illustrated how transportation decisions came to engulf Houston politics for much of the early 1980s.

The clashing of plans, and of Houstonians, pushed the HMA away from the fragile coalition of suburban and urban residents that ushered in METRO in 1978. As Houstonians articulated their positions on the transportation proposals, they posited incompatible visions for the city's future and of the politics of mobility. This divergence made conflict seemingly unavoidable. Suburban Houstonians desired not only easier commutes, but also hoped to improve and sustain the economically and racially exclusive neighborhoods and suburban lifestyle automobiles and roadways helped ensure.

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<sup>2</sup> Neighborhood Transportation Forum, "Boondoggle" Door Hanger, Box 4, Michael Berryhill Collection (MBC), MSS 074, Woodson Research Center (WRC), Rice University.



Figures 6.1 and 6.2: Hardy Corridor Images

These images demonstrate competing thoughts about the toll road and rail proposals put before Houstonians in 1983. Figure 6.1 an anti-tollway Houstonian protesting at a Houston City Council meeting. Figure 6.2 is an anti-rail door hanger. Figure 6.1, *Northeast News*, April 26, 1983, CCF, AAGH, Houston, Texas. Figure 6.2, Box 4, MBC, MSS 074, WRC, Rice University.

While the majority of residents within the city also sought projects that provided them easy movement, many also fiercely resisted projects that threatened to damage their communities. During the 1983 fight, city and suburban officials and residents abandoned rhetoric about balancing metropolitan transportation needs and backed the plan they believed best matched their interests. In the end, the rail plan was defeated by more than 40 percent. A few months later, the creation of the HCTRA was approved by nearly the same margin.<sup>3</sup> The results of the votes led HMA officials to orient the development of transportation systems toward the suburban fringe, a return in function, if not exact form, to the infrastructure priorities of the 1950s and the 1960s. The lopsided defeat of the rail plan signaled that the influence of suburban voters had eclipsed that of city residents in HMA-wide issues. Furthermore, it represented a setback for African American and ethnic

<sup>3</sup> The results of both elections can be found at the Harris County Clerk's office in Houston, Texas.

Mexican political power within the HMA, which, during the decade preceding the votes, had been on the rise and central to Houston's transportation decisions.

Changes in the federal government's stance toward transportation and urban policy during the early 1980s also affected the outcome of Houston's debates. Under President Reagan, federal highway officials devolved decision-making power to the state and local level and deregulated a number of transportation industries. While federal officials maintained control over the amount of money devoted to transportation, they deferred to their state level counterparts in project priorities and allocation. State officials, in turn, relied more on local actors, giving Houstonians and their elected officials more power than ever to shape their city. Devolution also strengthened citizen oversight and environmental protection measures that were put into place in the late 1960s and early 1970s by giving citizens even more direct input into infrastructure decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Not all federal policies benefitted local decision-makers and citizens, however. The Reagan administration drastically cut back on funds devoted to mass transit, for example. METRO's rail project only progressed after intense lobbying by leaders at the national level succeeded in securing earmarks. Cuts and realignments to streams of federal money for social programs sent officials and citizens scrambling as well. Federal support for community development initiatives that had survived intact through the 1970s declined in the 1980s. The Community Action Program and the agencies it supported, which were popular during the Johnson presidency, were reshuffled into the Community Block Grant Program under President Nixon, and in the 1980s that modest support was

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<sup>4</sup> For devolution discussion see Mark Rose and Raymond A. Mohl, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy Since 1939* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012).

removed.<sup>5</sup> In response to these changes, a new generation of community organization such as TMO emerged that relied less on federal dollars.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond these changes, two other major trends shaped Houston and the decisions residents made in the transportation debates. When oil prices reached an all-time high in 1980, Houston stood at the peak of a wave of petroleum-based prosperity that had been surging for nearly seventy years. In 1981, however, a double blow of national recession and dropping oil prices crippled the city's economy. The price of oil plummeted from thirty-one dollars a barrel (eighty-eight dollars in 2014) in 1980 to just over twelve dollars a barrel (twenty-five dollars in 2014) by 1986.<sup>7</sup> Fifty-five percent of the city's workforce was either directly or indirectly connected to the oil industry and the drop in prices led to massive layoffs.<sup>8</sup> In 1982-1983, the city lost 160,000 jobs and the unemployment rate rose to 9.8 percent. By 1986, the rate had grown to 15 percent, higher than during the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup> The economic decline affected Houstonians' perspectives of the city. According to the Houston Area Survey, a yearly study of attitudes and beliefs of Houstonians conducted since 1982, the number of Houstonians who believed that Houston offered excellent job prospects dropped from 76 percent in

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 168-176.

<sup>6</sup> William S. Clayson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 150-156.

<sup>7</sup> 2011 Annual Energy Review, United States Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/annual/showtext.cfm?t=ptb0518>, last accessed February 21, 2014; For a general discussion of changes in oil prices between 1979 and 1986 see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 699-764.

<sup>8</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Beth Anne Shelton, Nestor Rodriguez, Joe R. Feagin, Robert D. Bullard, and Robert D. Thomas, eds. *Houston: Growth and Decline in a Sunbelt Boomtown* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1989), 25; Nestor Rodriguez, "Latino Settlement Patterns in 'The Free Enterprise City,'" in Robert D. Bullard, J. Eugene Grigsby III, and Charles Lee, eds., *Residential Apartheid: The American Legacy* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies Publication, University of California Los Angeles, 1994): 203.

1982 to 11 percent by 1986.<sup>10</sup> More than just perception, however, businesses, residents, the city and state governments struggled to pay their bills without the profits, economic growth, and taxes that came with elevated oil prices. Bankruptcies and foreclosures were commonplace. In 1986, some 25,000 homes and businesses were foreclosed upon. Bankruptcies, which in 1980 occurred at the rate of twenty-five per month, rose to ninety-three a month by 1984, with retail, real estate, and energy businesses the hardest hit.<sup>11</sup>

On top of economic changes, a massive influx of immigrants from Central American and Asian countries altered the demographic makeup of the city and reshaped its settlement patterns. Approximately 100,000 Central Americans and 50,000 Southeast Asians came to the city during the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Because of their larger number, Central American immigrants were most directly linked with the shifts occurring throughout the metropolitan area. Predominantly from the war-torn countries of El Salvador and Guatemala, these immigrants settled outside of traditional ethnic Mexican neighborhoods on Houston's east side, giving Houston a diverse Latino population. Both Central American and Asian immigrants moved into west Houston apartment complexes originally constructed to house the white-collar workers prior to the economic bust. Seemingly overnight the ethnic makeup of entire sections of the city changed.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Klineberg, "Houston Area Survey (1982-2007): Findings from the 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Survey," Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University, 2007, 2. <http://has.rice.edu/downloads/>, last accessed February 22, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 96-105.

<sup>12</sup> Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 254-255; Nestor Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston," in Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 24; Nestor Rodriguez, "Undocumented Central Americans in Houston: Diverse Populations," *International Migration Review*, vol. 21 (Spring 1987): 4-25; Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 225; Fred von der Mehden, ed., *The Ethnic Groups of Houston* (Houston, Tex.: Rice University, 1984), 63-112.

<sup>13</sup> Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves," 24; Shelton et al, *Houston*, 93-122; Rodriguez, "Latino Settlements," 204-216; Nestor Rodriguez and Ximena Urrutia-Rojas, "Impact of Recent Refugee Migration to Texas: A Comparison of Southeast Asian and Central American Newcomers," in Wanye

combination of economic uncertainty and new residents increased competition for resources and raised the stakes of HMA-wide debates.<sup>14</sup>

Despite connections to national and international trends, most Houstonians framed the transportation debates in decidedly local terms. A close examination of Houstonians' participation in the contests shows that many citizens dealt with the city's uncertain future by attempting to exert control over their immediate surroundings. In that vein, while this chapter considers how the argument played out across the city, it will also look closely at its contestation within the Hardy corridor, a 400-foot-wide swath of land that ran for several miles from downtown Houston north toward Montgomery County. This area was slated to house either one or both of the rail and toll road networks, which placed it at the center of the broader struggle over the systems. Defined here as the land that falls in the rough triangle made by I-45, SH 59, and current-day Beltway 8, the corridor contained just under 180,000 Houstonians in 1980. (Figure 6.3) White residents made up 66 percent of that number. African Americans represented 15 percent and Latino citizens made up an additional 17 percent. White residents dominated the northern parts of the corridor, while black and Latino residents made up majorities in several downtown census tracts. The median income of households in the corridor was \$21,266 (\$60,300 in 2014), making it a solidly middle-class section of the city.<sup>15</sup>

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Holtzman and Thomas Bornemann eds., *Mental Health of Immigrants and Refugees* (Austin, Tex.: Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, 1990), 263-278.

<sup>14</sup> For attitudes about immigration and the impact it had on the HMA see the Houston Area Survey for data and questions see <http://has.rice.edu/surveytopics/>, last accessed February 22, 2014. From the 1980s onward attitudes about immigrants have slowly become more positive according to the survey and its reports see Stephen Klineberg, "An Historical View of Immigration in Houston, Based on the Houston Area Survey," Center For Houston's Future, 2008, <http://has.rice.edu/downloads/>, last accessed February 22, 2014. Rodriguez and Urrutia-Rojas, "Impact of Recent Migration to Texas," 273-277.

<sup>15</sup> Statistics taken from Social Explorer, 1980 US Census, 41 Census Tracts in Hardy Corridor as defined above, surveying for race and income. [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com), last accessed February 23, 2014.

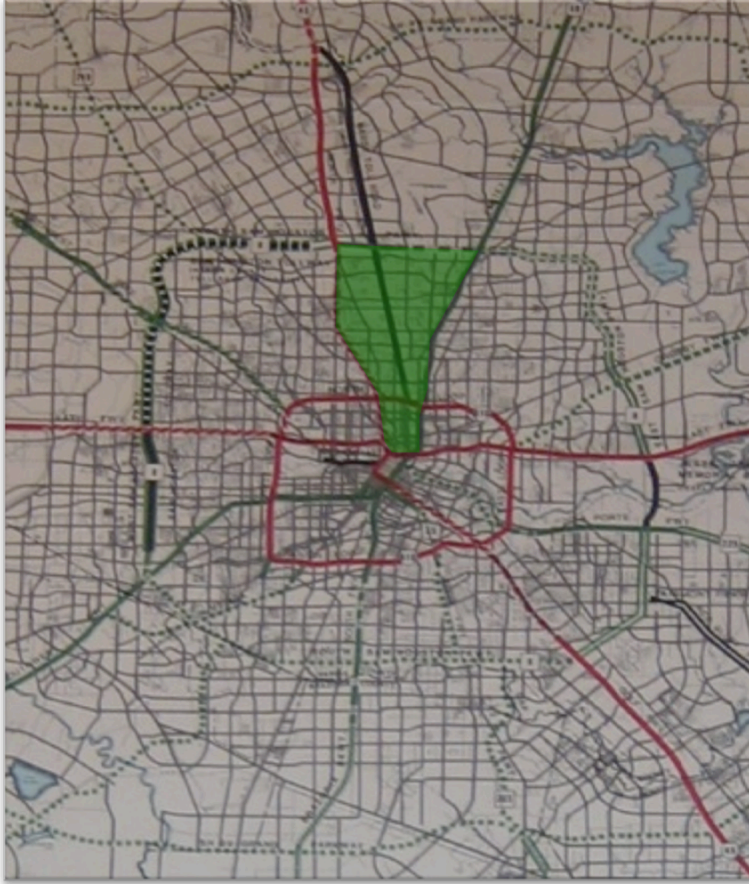


Figure 6.3: The Hardy Corridor

1989 highway map illustrates the focus of the 1983 debates. The Hardy Street Corridor is shaded in green above. The black line represents the path of the Hardy Toll Road, which also would have been the route of the rail. The incomplete green circle is the still in progress Beltway 8. Status of Freeways, Houston-Galveston Regional Transit Study, Jan 1989, Transportation Map Drawer TXR MC B3, R-818, HMRC.

As previous chapters have shown, Houstonians' understandings of place often shaped reactions to infrastructure projects. Just as conflicting perspectives about the Fifth Ward influenced decisions about the interstates, so too did competing meanings predicate the discussion around the Hardy corridor. Many residents of the racially and economically mixed corridor area belonged to TMO. With the help of the organization, these citizens resisted the toll road plan because it threatened their neighborhoods with displacement and increasing pollution. Non-corridor residents, too, held strong notions of

place, but because they did not identify with the corridor beyond seeing it as a possible congestion relief valve, Houstonians from outside of area did not worry about the potential negative effects toll road construction might have on residents who lived near it. In the end, the way many Houstonians voted in the two 1983 referenda boiled down to where they lived and how they perceived the places they did not.<sup>16</sup>

Given the political, social, and economic situation that swirled around the 1983 transportation debates, framing the conflict as one between suburbanites and city residents, or African Americans and whites will not suffice. A diverse collection of actors from Houston and its environs participated in the dispute and held varying understandings of mobility and about how the decision would affect the future of the HMA. Houston's 1983 debate was hard to define. At one moment, it concentrated upon a single right-of-way; at the next, it connected with national-level policy debates. Other cities confronted similar transportation problems as Houston did in the 1980s and did so within the same national framework. Yet, citizens in each locale made choices unique to their circumstances.<sup>17</sup> The plasticity of these debates not only altered the way citizens discussed and understood the contests, but also helped determine their outcomes, illustrating how patterns of metropolitan development in American cities were shaped by both national frameworks and local peculiarities.

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<sup>16</sup> These conceptions of place-making owe a debt of scholarly gratitude to Matthew Klingle, whose conception of an ethic of place has helped influence my own thinking on how to view urban landscapes as simultaneously urban and natural spaces. For more on Klingle's thoughts on the ethic of place see, Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007.)

<sup>17</sup> John Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 139-179. Mollenkopf discusses the ways that local decision-makers interpreted and implemented federal policies in divergent ways dependent on a variety of local factors. Houston's rejection of a train system did make it an exception among major American cities in the early 1980s, many of which embraced such systems. See Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2003), 208.



## THE PRIMARY ACTORS

As details of the toll road and rail proposals emerged beginning in 1979 and 1980, it became clear that there would be friction due to their overlapping routes. At one point it appeared possible that the rail and toll systems could be built on shared rights-of-way, but divisions soon emerged that scuttled possible compromises.<sup>18</sup> When the city's economic prospects nosedived, the projects and their massive price tags became all the more contentious. Given the see-sawing nature of the HMA's political balance between suburban and city interests and the gamut of attitudes about METRO, the transportation debates quickly morphed into a skirmish in the larger fight to control political power in the HMA. The battle lines of the 1983 debates were not clean, however. Some suburban residents supported rail. Some city residents clamored for toll roads. While the opposing sides were not monolithic, on the whole, the contest pitted mainly residents from within the city limits against those from beyond them. Many from each group had, just five years earlier, joined forces to create METRO. This alliance dissolved at the precise moment that citizens—especially suburban whites, African Americans, and Latinos—gained greater decision-making power in American urban politics. In Houston, these groups found themselves embroiled in a clash over who possessed the power to determine the city's future.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> There was one suggestion of a shared right-of-way, but neither side could agree to the compromise, or upon which system should be built first. Texas Turnpike Authority, "Hardy Tollway-METRO Rail Compatibility Study: Preliminary Engineering and Financial Feasibility Report," May 1983, Planning Library, Texas Department of Transportation, Houston Branch.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 185-262. Abbott argues that suburban political power and independence increased concomitantly with minority voices in urban areas. The contests between these two powerful political sectors represented a major factor in shaping Sunbelt metro areas in the 1980s.

## RAIL SUPPORTERS

In April 1982, METRO made a splashy hire. The Authority tapped Alan Kiepper, one of the nation's leading experts on and managers of public mass transportation systems, to head the agency.<sup>20</sup> The hiring of Kiepper, the man who steered the construction of Atlanta's Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority in the 1970s, sent an obvious signal to Houstonians: METRO was serious about building a rail system.<sup>21</sup> Kiepper and METRO argued that a train system would cement Houston's place in the pantheon of the nation's elite cities. Houston officials pushed the rail plan, worried that the city would fall behind its peers if they did not.<sup>22</sup> This trope—the idea that a city's transportation structures equated to or reflected its progress and growth—held a central place in the rhetoric of both sides during the debates.<sup>23</sup> With the backing of city leaders, Kiepper and the staff of transit veterans he imported from Atlanta expanded and accelerated the development of the rail plan that METRO began formulating in 1980.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Mayor Reaches to Atlanta for Possible End to City’s Police, Mass Transit Woes,” *Houston Informer*, April 3, 1982; “Atlanta Transit Chief Resigns for Houston Job,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1983, 26; Jan Rich, “Rail Likely to Stay Top Transit Issue in ’83,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 4, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Jankowski, “MTA’s New Driver,” *Houston*, August 1982, HMRC, 46-50, 71-72.

<sup>22</sup> “Seize the opportunity,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 10, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 Vertical File (VF), HMRC. METRO officials pointed to systems in other cities as models in agency publications, press releases, and newspaper articles. John Sedlak also recalled that METRO was aware of other ongoing transit projects, John Sedlak, interview by author, April 11, 2012, Houston, Texas, audio recording. Federal lobbying by local officials made it clear that they recognized they were competing against other locales for financial support, see Dan Arnold, interview by author, January 31, 2012. Finally, even critics were aware of mass transit projects across the nation. Texas State Highway Commissioners grilled Dan Arnold about the efficacy of transit systems during the 1981 public hearing. State Highway and Public Transportation Commission (SHPTC) Public Hearing, June 23, 1981, Box 1990/11-1, Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Public Hearing Dockets, 1979-1988, Texas State Archives (TSA), 28-45.

<sup>23</sup> Dan Arnold hinted at this desire at the 1981 Texas State Highway Commission hearing, SHPTC Public Hearing, June 23, 1981, 35. A number of scholars have discussed the drive to become an “elite” city by building a mass transit network. See, Zachary Schrag, *Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Jonathan Richmond, *Transport of Delight: The Mythical Conception of Rail Transit in Los Angeles* (Akron, Ohio: Akron University Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> John Sedlak was one such hire. The migration of transit experts from Atlanta to Houston highlights the exchange that existed between American cities. John Sedlak, interview by author, April 11, 2012.

METRO's rail proposal walked the line of balanced suburb-city service that the agency promised during the campaign for its creation in 1978. As we saw in Chapter Five, in an effort to garner the support from residents in both areas, METRO officials embraced approaches that evenly distributed the consequences and benefits of transportation structures across both the city and its suburbs. METRO sold rail to suburban voters by touting the plan's intention to connect the job centers of west Houston to the homes of commuters north of the city. For city residents, METRO echoed its 1978 campaign, promising that the line would provide improved movement for all city dwellers, especially transit-dependent residents from the near northside.<sup>25</sup>

Impressed by the balanced elements of the rail plan and convinced that such a system offered the best way forward, TMO became one of the staunchest supporters of METRO's rail efforts. A majority of TMO's membership consisted of poor and working-class Latino and black citizens from Catholic churches across the city. A significant minority of working-class and middle-class white Catholics also belonged to the group, as did congregants from a handful of black and white Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues. The organization modeled itself on the San Antonio-based Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and its umbrella organization the Industrial Areas Foundations.<sup>26</sup> Similar to COPS, TMO secured financial support through dues paid by

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<sup>25</sup> METRO, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement: Southwest/Westpark Corridor Alternatives Analysis," September 1980, Box 2, MBC, WRC.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Snyder, "TMO's Theory: Confrontation Gets Power," *Houston Chronicle*, April 4, 1980, H-TMO VF, HMRC. For more about COPS, the Industrial Areas Foundation, and its founder, radical theorist and organizer, Saul Alinsky, see, Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Susan Fainstein and Ann R. Markusen, *Urban Policy: Bridging the Social and Economic Development Gap* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Ernesto Cortes, *Reweaving the Fabric: The Iron Rule and the IAF Strategy for Dealing with Poverty through Power and Politics* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton: North Texas University Press, 1990.)

member congregations, which gave the groups an independence that previous community organizations did not possess.<sup>27</sup> TMO strived to bring marginalized Houstonians into civic discourse. Tackling a disparate slate of topics including immigration reform, voting rights, transportation, and government accountability, at its peak in 1980, TMO brought members together from nearly 80 congregations.<sup>28</sup>

TMO's emphasis on citizen participation echoed earlier actions in Houston that offset official-driven planning. Rather than act as advocates for Houstonians, TMO organizers aimed to cultivate leaders from among the group's membership and empower them to create the group's agenda.<sup>29</sup> Ramona Toliver, whose experiences with the interstate were explored in Chapter Two, belonged to the organization in the 1980s and recalled that the group encouraged members to act on their own behalf. TMO taught Toliver to remember "that whatever you stand for, you stand for. You don't change."<sup>30</sup> Having members in leadership roles meant that TMO was intimately connected to its constituents and their immediate concerns.

TMO appealed to many Houstonians of faith because of its emphasis on self-help, citizen empowerment, and mission for social good. These tenets meshed particularly well with Catholic beliefs that touted service to the poor and personal liberation.<sup>31</sup> The city possessed a diverse Catholic population that included African Americans from Louisiana, ethnic Mexicans, white Houstonians, and, increasingly during the early 1980s, Central

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<sup>27</sup> See William Clayson, *Freedom is not Enough*, 150-156.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Rev. Dan Scheel to Parish Council Presidents, November 25, 1980, Box 3, John McCarthy Files (JMF), Accession 98-18, AAGH. For a brief history of TMO's founding and connection with Industrial Areas Foundation see, Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 59-65; Rogers, *Cold Anger*, 143-154; Shelton et. al., *Houston*, 60-63. On community organization in the 1970s and early 1980s, see Fisher, *Let the People Decide*, 132-167.

<sup>29</sup> See Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 15-72; Fisher, *Let the People Decide*, 132-167.

<sup>30</sup> See Ramona Toliver, interview by author, April 20, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Trevino, *Church in the Barrio*, 167-171; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 190-198.

American immigrants.<sup>32</sup> TMO's rise coincided with a moment when the broader Catholic Church and the leaders of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston were confronting two decades of immense change and theological revolution. Vatican II, the rise of liberation theology in Latin American, and the social action demands of the Civil Rights and Chicano Movements all challenged the Church to help alleviate poverty and inequality.<sup>33</sup>

During the late 1960s and 1970s, many Catholic leaders in Texas, including those in Houston, responded to the desires of their lay members by offering support for the social causes pushed by ethnic Mexican and African American congregants. While Church officials in Houston and Texas reacted strongly against the radical actions by some congregants during the Chicano movement, by the mid-1970s most Catholic leaders supported campaigns for social justice.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-1970s John Morkovsky, Bishop of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese, backed the formation of the Metropolitan Ministries, a predecessor to TMO.<sup>35</sup> Morkovsky, his auxiliary Bishop John McCarthy, and several prominent priests backed TMO from its inception.<sup>36</sup> These leaders recognized that such organizations not only adhered to Catholic teachings, but that they improved the communities of their congregants and brought Catholics from across the city together. In addition, they served to shore up loyalty to the Catholic Church. The early 1980s was a time when Pentecostal churches were gaining ground on the Catholic Church in Latin

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<sup>32</sup> On black Catholic Roots, Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 113-117; ethnic Mexican, see Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*; de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*.

<sup>33</sup> Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 193-195. On Liberation Theology, Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Dublin : Maryknoll, N.Y: Gill and Macmillan ; Orbis, 1983); Daniel H. Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism*, Studies in Church and State (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992). On Vatican II, see Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Gene Burns, *The Frontiers of Catholicism The Politics of Ideology in a Liberal World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 167-177; Rogers, *Cold Anger*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers, *Cold Anger*, 145-146.

<sup>36</sup> Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 45, 49, 196.

America and within immigrant populations in the United States. Leaders recognized that supporting groups like TMO might help keep parishioners content and prevent an exodus to other Christian sects.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that TMO consisted of mainly Catholics and received such support from the Catholic Church differentiates the group from other community organizations that were shaped by the leadership of other Christian denominations. In the South, African American Christian churches possessed a long history of participation in a variety of political causes, none more prominent than leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. These denominations had different interactions with and perspectives towards the activism of their congregants than the Catholic Church. Houston's Protestant and Jewish congregations did get involved with the group, but did so to a lesser extent than the city's Catholics. While both traditions possessed long histories of engagement with social justice causes, the decentralized structure of Protestant congregations and TMO's struggles to convince non-Catholic groups that their interests would be valued in a group dominated by Catholics and Latinos made recruiting these congregations difficult. Once the balanced, participatory methods of TMO and the power of citywide collective action became clear, several synagogues and Protestant congregations joined the group.<sup>38</sup>

TMO's effectiveness as a political organization rested on the religious institutions from which it drew its members. As stable community anchors with dedicated members

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<sup>37</sup> Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 196.

<sup>38</sup> On difficulty of bringing protestant and Jewish members into TMO/COPs and the overlaps between the religions and the group, see Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 198-205. For broader discussion of Protestantism and Judaism's engagement with social problems, see Ronald C. White, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1976); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*, Studies in Church and State (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988); Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994). On Jews and the Civil Rights Movement in Houston, Bryan Edward Stone, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010): 193-214.

and deep connections to distinct parts of the city, church communities provided many resources from which TMO could draw. The knitting together of religious institutions cultivated a network of racially and economically diverse residents from across the city and formulated a formidable political coalition. Unlike the neighborhood level resistance of the Houstonians who organized against the Outer Belt or the Harrisburg freeway, TMO's citywide constituency possessed a broader set of concerns and could bring greater pressure to bear on politicians.

TMO combined traditional electoral significance—its role as a mouthpiece for thousands of religious Houstonians—with progressive, often confrontational political tactics to bring attention to the issues it wanted to address. Once members identified transportation as a major topic of interest, TMO engaged deeply with debates and forwarded member's perspective of the politics of mobility. The group advocated for the provision of adequate access to mobility systems for all city residents and called for greater citizen input in the transportation decision-making process. Propelled by the concerns of its members, TMO became one of the main combatants in the 1983 debates. Residents of the Hardy corridor wanted to protect their homes. Black and Latino members living in neighborhoods underserved by buses hoped the rail plan would make their daily movements less stressful. TMO campaigned to secure each of these outcomes and in the process a diverse constituency of Houstonians worked together in an effort to shape the city's future. The group invested a good deal of its political capital into the rail plan and pressured local, county, and state leaders to reject toll roads.

As groups like TMO joined METRO and other city officials in backing the rail plan, they elevated the stakes of the transportation debate. The involvement of TMO and other citizens made it clear that, like the HARTA and METRO decisions, the 1983 debates would not be settled by officials alone. Residents took full advantage of federal

devolution and citizen oversight mechanisms to participate in the debates.<sup>39</sup> Rail proponents argued the system could solve the metropolitan area's traffic problems, vault Houston into the national elite, and balance the needs of both the central core and the booming suburbs. Just as pro-rail citizens felt strongly about rail and exercised their right to participate in the decision-making process, however, so too did supporters of the toll system feel warranted in pushing back against the rail plan and advocating for toll roads.

### **TOLL ROAD SUPPORTERS**

As Kiepper and his METRO staff busily drew up rail plans and consolidated support, toll road proponents promoted their system. Offered first by the Texas Turnpike Authority (TTA) in 1979, the toll road plan took off after Harris County Judge Jon Lindsay proposed the creation of a county run toll system. County officials like Lindsay recognized that metropolitan-level decisions offered an avenue through which they could attain more political power. Buoyed by burgeoning suburban populations and these communities' defection from METRO, county politicians strengthened their hold on power by catering to non-city voters and vesting themselves with greater governing authority through metropolitan bodies like the HCTRA.<sup>40</sup> In selling the toll road plan, promoters argued that a user fee approach would provide funding for infrastructure at a

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<sup>39</sup> As an example of the public participation that went into the 1983 debates, more than 80 public meetings were held dedicated to the Westpark rail proposal alone, see Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO), "Public Hearing: EIS on Southwest/Westpark Corridor," October 27, 1980, Box 2, Folder: Metro Hearing 1980, MBC, WRC, 9. Other debates produced a similar number of public meetings. This does not include those hearing and meetings held at the state or county level, nor the individual meetings members of the METRO board and County Commissioners court held during the debates. Dan Arnold, former METRO board chairman estimated that he alone attended the meetings of at least 20 community groups during the buildup to the 1983 rail referendum. See Dan Arnold, interview by author, January 31, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> On the power created by regional governance bodies see Elihu Rubin, *Insuring the City: The Prudential Center and the Postwar Urban Landscape* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2012); Louise Nelson Dyble, *Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, And The Golden Gate Bridge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000);



time of shrinking federal budgets and ballooning local needs.<sup>41</sup> Further, HCTRA backers pointed out that creating a toll road authority would put control of the metropolitan area's roadways into local hands.

Structured to benefit the political aims of county officials and the transportation needs of suburban residents, the toll road proposal scrapped the balanced approach to metropolitan transportation. It offered few projects that aided the central city, focusing instead on facilitating the movement of suburban residents into and out of downtown. Despite the fact that the toll roads would only reach certain sections of city, just like the rail system, Lindsay shrewdly sold the system as an improvement upon the entire metropolitan area's mobility. This tactic allowed the HCTRA to gain broad support, unlike METRO, which failed to convince voters that the rail system presented a metropolitan solution. Pitching the system as a whole, rather than attempting to fight over its individual parts, also allowed supporters to avoid becoming mired in particularly divisive debates such as those around the Hardy corridor.

White suburbanites took an active role in the debates, most often supporting the toll road plan because they felt it would be cheaper than rail and because they doubted that METRO and Houston officials had their best interests at heart. Some suburbanites, and many city residents for that manner, did not support transit because they feared allowing systems into suburbs and exclusive neighborhoods would lead to non-white and poorer citizens moving into those areas.<sup>42</sup> The actions suburbanites took in the debates

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<sup>41</sup> SHPTC Public Hearing, June 23, 1981, Box 1990/11-1, Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Public Hearing Dockets, 1979-1988, TSA, 25-35.

<sup>42</sup> Once legal segregation fell away, suburbs remained majority white through the combination of continued discriminatory lending and because of the economic disparity between white and non-white city residents. The lower average incomes of non-white Houstonians made affording the high home prices and long commutes in automobiles difficult. White suburbanites in many American cities rejected transit because they hoped that preventing the relatively cheap form of access would keep neighborhoods economically and racially exclusive, Atlanta provides a good example of this. See, Matthew D. Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006),

demonstrated that the HMA was becoming increasingly fragmented. While Houston officials effectively avoided this problem during the METRO decision, city leaders could no longer ignore the demands of increasingly powerful suburban constituencies and jurisdictions. As they grew in population and political power, these entities threatened to separate themselves from Houston's control.<sup>43</sup> In hopes of stemming some of the calls for autonomy, Houston officials catered more and more to suburban voters and their officials.

Beyond suburban politicians and residents, the most politically influential promoter of the toll road plan was the Houston Chamber of Commerce. While the organization gave tacit support to the rail referendum, it wholeheartedly embraced the Toll Roads and clearly preferred them to mass transit. The organization's feeble support for rail signaled its ongoing shift from a Houston-oriented group to a metropolitan-focused one.<sup>44</sup> Like Harris County officials, the Chamber recognized that Houston's incredible outward growth made broadening its message and focus essential. Chamber leaders believed that because roads encouraged development along the suburban fringe, these systems could do more to promote the HMA's economic growth than rail. The backing of this powerful interest group, one that had influenced Houston policy for decades, played a big role in convincing many Houstonians to support the toll road plan.

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113; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005): 248-251; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996): 155-158; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Several scholars have written about the process of fragmentation and incorporation. See, Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008); Lassiter, *Silent Majority*.

<sup>44</sup> When weighing in on the 1983 debates the organization's publication, *Houston*, long a champion of Houston business development and booster of the CBD, began a steady shift toward the promotion of suburban growth. The most concrete signal of this shift would be the group's name change in 1989 to the Greater Houston Partnership.

As earlier chapters showed, few Houstonians who found their homes and neighborhoods within the projected routes of transportation systems viewed this position as a positive. Indeed, both toll road and rail plans elicited a number of not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) reactions from residents across the city. Outside of TMO member objections about the tollway in the Hardy corridor, some of the loudest complaints came from elite Houstonians who lived along the southwestern leg of the proposed rail system in the Rice University, Bellaire, and Montrose areas. While NIMBY responses to infrastructure projects were by no means new, as land for rights-of-way became increasingly difficult to secure in Houston, officials confronted greater citizen pushback than ever before.<sup>45</sup> In the lead up to the 1983 votes, most Houstonians agreed that something needed to be done about the city's traffic problems, but no one—not the working-class residents of the northern Fifth Ward nor the middle-to-upper class residents of Bellaire—wanted the solution to run through their communities.

### **THE HARDY CORRIDOR AND THE ROOTS OF DEBATE**

The roots of the 1983 transportation referenda can be traced to 1979 and 1980, when the TTA first proposed an HMA-wide toll system with a leg running through the Hardy Corridor and METRO proposed a plan for a west Houston rail line that would later expand to include a line through the Hardy corridor. The announcements instigated a metropolitan wide debate that persisted until the votes. TMO, led by white, Latino, and black members who lived in the corridor, rose to prominence during these initial discussions and objected to the TTA's plans by articulating a place-based defense of their

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<sup>45</sup> For more readings on NIMBYism's rise and impact on American cities see Michael Dear, "Understanding and Overcoming the NIMBY Syndrome," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 58 (Summer 1992): 288–300; Carissa Schively, "Understanding the NIMBY and LULU Phenomena: Reassessing Our Knowledge Base and Informing Future Research," *Journal of Planning Literature* 21 (3) (2007): 255–66. On NIMBYism as an environmental justice tactic, see Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

neighborhoods. This opening salvo defined the actors, rhetoric, and parameters of the 1983 referendum campaigns.

In early 1979, when the TTA announced that it would study the possibility of bringing toll roads to Houston, it initiated studies for three possible routes—one along Hardy Street, one through the Westpark corridor, and one that followed the much-contested Harrisburg route.<sup>46</sup> Given the tensions around highways in east Houston, the Harrisburg route was quickly dismissed, leaving only the Hardy corridor and Westpark routes as possibilities. Eventually, the TTA concluded that the Hardy corridor presented the most feasible option for the first arm of a broader toll road network. With the support of Houston officials, the TTA conducted feasibility study on the Hardy Toll Road near the end of 1979.<sup>47</sup> In its final assessment of the corridor's suitability, the TTA asserted that toll road could only succeed in the corridor if "no directly competing toll road or other expressway-type facilities...or mass transit projects" were built in or near the area.<sup>48</sup> This conclusion made the stakes over controlling the corridor's future obvious. The construction of one transportation system would likely prevent the building of others.

METRO forwarded a plan for the Westpark corridor in a September 1980 draft environmental impact statement. The Authority called for the construction of a heavy rail system, similar to Chicago's El or New York's subway, which would run from the western suburbs into downtown.<sup>49</sup> TMO and other rail proponents immediately asked METRO to expand their proposal to include the Hardy Corridor. At this initial stage,

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<sup>46</sup> "Turnpike Authority to Ask OK for 3 Tollway Studies" *Houston Post*, January 24, 1979, H-Toll Roads-1979-1982 VF, HMRC.

<sup>47</sup> "Council Authorizes spending \$10,000 on toll road study" *Houston Chronicle*, December 19, 1979, H-Toll Roads—1979-1982 VF HMRC.

<sup>48</sup> "Initial Feasibility Assessment: Houston Tollways," Prepared by Wilbur Smith and Associates for the TTA, October 1979, Box 1, Folder 19, Hardy Street Toll Road Controversy Collection (HSTRCC), HMRC, 12.

<sup>49</sup> METRO, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement: Southwest/Westpark Corridor Alternatives Analysis," September 1980, Box 2, MBC, WRC.

Harris County officials, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Houston City Council all expressed support for the Westpark plan, but none openly called for its expansion.<sup>50</sup> At a public hearing on the rail line, County Judge Lindsay happily reported the county's backing. In his remarks he lauded rail as an important first step in addressing the region's mobility problems. He pointed out, though, that "we have a very complex transportation problem in Harris County. It's not only a rail system that's needed, but all facets of transportation." In order to address the region's traffic problems, Lindsay concluded, "we need to work together."<sup>51</sup> Although this cooperative approach seemed possible for a brief moment, conflicts emerged as details for the plans solidified and expanded.

A rift between the road and rail proposals emerged when TMO and other pro-transit Houstonians refused to give the same support to the toll roads that county and suburban officials gave to rail. TMO immediately criticized the toll road proposal's potential impact on the Hardy corridor and called for extending the rail line into the corridor. Well aware of earlier damaging highway projects, TMO argued that a toll road would create long-term problems for residents in the area. The road would bring "increased air pollution, wasteful energy use...increased runoff and flooding, and aesthetic blight" to the neighborhoods through which it ran. TMO called upon citizens to embrace the "cleaner, safer, and more efficient" option of mass transit. They insisted that the "primary concern for transportation in Houston in the next twenty to thirty years" needed to be a "focus on how best to move more people, not more automobiles."<sup>52</sup>

TMO also contended that the Hardy Toll Road's true purpose was to benefit a small cohort of builders and developers with vested interests along and at the end of the route. As we saw in Chapters One and Two, developers possessed significant power in

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<sup>50</sup> METRO, Public Hearing, October 27, 1980, 13-16, 29-30.

<sup>51</sup> METRO, Public Hearing, October 27, 1980, 13.

<sup>52</sup> "The Rail Alternative—Why We Oppose a Toll Road," February 1980, TMO File, CCF, AAGH.

directing, and benefitting from, Houston's growth. This reality had not disappeared by the 1980s. The Houston Planning Commission still consisted mainly of men with direct ties to construction industries. In addition, Houston Mayor Jim McConn and Harris County Judge Jon Lindsay owned construction firms involved in suburban development and both received campaign support from development interests.<sup>53</sup> Many residents from the Hardy corridor believed the road was planned only as a way to benefit these developers and the communities they built north of the city, such as the Woodlands.<sup>54</sup> By highlighting what they saw as insider politics, TMO and other rail advocates hoped to dispel toll road proponents "regional good" rhetoric.

Finally, TMO asserted that the TTA was downplaying the actual costs—both financial and physical—of their plans. TMO leader Brian McCann, a white resident of the Hardy Corridor, argued that descriptions of the toll road plan purposefully underestimated the footprint the road would leave on the surrounding areas. According to Louie Welch, Houston's one-time mayor and Chamber of Commerce president during the debate, the toll road's right-of-way would be approximately 135 feet. McCann, looking at other area highways and consulting the engineering standards of the Texas Highway Department, concluded that when all was said and done the actual right-of-way would come in at more than 550 feet. Such a right-of-way, McCann argued, meant that parts of bordering communities "would be wiped out."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Planning Commission dominated by builders, developers" *Houston Post*, March 2, 1980, H-City Planning-Clippings VF, HMRC.

<sup>54</sup> Houston Interfaith Sponsoring Committee, Letter from TMO Leaders to Members, March 22, 1982, TMO Records, CCF, AAGH; Jan Rich, "New Group Forms on Toll Road," *Houston Chronicle*, November 19, 1982, H-Toll Roads—1979-1982 VF, HMRC; Charlie Evans, "Freeways Impact growth, land costs," *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1980, H-Growth and Development -1980-1982 VF, HMRC; Letter from Alex Lieber-Alessie to Mayor Kathy Whitmire, February 8, 1983, Box 74, Folder 4, Eleanor Tinsley Collection (ETC), HMRC. For information about the Woodlands, see George T. Morgan Jr. and John O. King, *The Woodlands: New Community Development, 1964-1983* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> Brian McCann, "Chamber's Toll Road Approval Fuels City's Auto Dependence," *The Leader*, April 18, 1980, Box 1, Folder 20, HSTRCC, HMRC.

Despite TMO's formation just two years earlier, the response of local politicians to its protest of the Hardy toll road plan demonstrated the group's tangible political power. Many officials whose districts overlapped with the Hardy corridor came out against the toll road. U.S. Representative Bob Eckhardt, who also opposed the proposed Harrisburg Tollway in the 1970s, derided the potential road as "the same old worn-out solution" to Houston's congestion problems.<sup>56</sup> Houston City Councilman Dale Gorczynski, a former member of TMO, argued that while the toll road would benefit "the trucking industry and Montgomery County," he could not envision any such benefits for those "residents living along it."<sup>57</sup> Councilman Ernest McGowen joined Gorczynski in opposition and pledged at the annual TMO meeting to defeat the tollway "even if it means lying down in the street." McGowen lauded the hard work of TMO, telling them that they were "talking loud enough for City Hall to hear you."<sup>58</sup> Because TMO mobilized a vocal set of citywide voters, local officials clamored to support the group's agenda in the early 1980s.

The furious pushback by TMO and their political backers against the toll road plan nearly led to the TTA abandoning the proposal. TMO tried to ensure this outcome by convincing the Harris County Commissioners Court to withdraw their support of the plan. While TMO representatives made a withering presentation against the plan at an August 1980 Commissioners Court meeting, Judge Lindsay convinced his fellow commissioners to maintain their support of the toll road plan.<sup>59</sup> Undeterred by this setback, rail advocates turned their attention to the Houston City Council. Hundreds of

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<sup>56</sup> "Politicians Aim to Scotch Hardy Street Toll Study, Plan to Boost Rail System," *Houston Post*, February 19, 1980, H-MTA Rail-1980-1982 VF, HMRC.

<sup>57</sup> "Gorczynski Favors Railway Over Northside Toll Road Plan," *Houston Chronicle*, March 6, 1980, Box 1, Folder 20, HSTRCC, HMRC.

<sup>58</sup> "Organization's No. 1 Concern Hardy Street" *Houston Chronicle*, July 19, 1980.

<sup>59</sup> "Commissioners OK resolution against Toll Road" *Houston Chronicle*, August 8, 1980, H-Toll Roads—1979-1982 VF, HMRC.

TMO members converged on a September 1980 meeting. The speakers represented TMO's diverse membership—a priest, a labor leader, a pharmacist, a teacher, and a neighborhood association president all spoke against the toll road plan.<sup>60</sup> In front of the roiling crowd, the Council passed a resolution that established “rail as a preferred mode of mass transportation for the Hardy Road corridor,” but took no definitive action.<sup>61</sup> While not a complete victory, the resolution gave TMO and its allies momentum in their fight to stop the toll road plan.

Not convinced that local resolutions alone could protect corridor residents, TMO redoubled their efforts against the toll road project by joining METRO officials on a trip to promote the city's rail proposal in Washington D.C. Along with Rep. Eckhardt, TMO representatives and METRO officials met with the U.S. Secretary of Transportation Neil Goldschmidt in October 1980.<sup>62</sup> METRO officials likewise continued to lobby the recalcitrant Reagan administration for federal support.<sup>63</sup> By joining with local officials and taking the METRO plan before federal officials, TMO actively participated in the national conversation surrounding transit. While no funds were guaranteed at the original meeting, the lobbying efforts brought Houston's plans to federal attention and by 1983 a large chunk of funds were earmarked for Houston.<sup>64</sup> Buoyed by federal support, the METRO board fulfilled TMO's hopes and broadened their rail plans by designating the

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<sup>60</sup> Meeting attendance estimates from “TMO Members Ask Council to Back Rail System in Hardy Street Corridor” *Houston Chronicle*, September 10, 1980, Box 1, Folder 7, HSTRCC; “350 Northside Residents Promote Rail Over Hardy Toll Road at City Council,” *The Houston Leader*, September 10, 1980, Box 1, Folder 7, HSTRCC. Speaker list from “350 Northside Residents.”

<sup>61</sup> “Consideration of Rail Transit for Hardy Road Corridor Urged,” *Houston Post*, September 18, 1980, Box 1, Folder 7, HSTRCC, RG F 018, HMRC; Raul Reyes, “Council Recommends Rail System for Hardy Road Corridor,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 18, 1980, Box 1, Folder 7, HSTRCC.

<sup>62</sup> “Outdated Formula” *Houston Post*, October 21, 1980.

<sup>63</sup> Dan Arnold, interview by author, January 31, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Metro May Get up to \$750 million for Rail Transit System, Senator Says,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 15, 1983, H-MTA Rail Jan-March 1983 VF, HMRC.



Hardy corridor as a path for a future rail line.<sup>65</sup> The announcement marked a victory for TMO and rail advocates. It also ensured that the corridor, now home to two transit proposals, would hold a central place in the contest to shape the city's transportation decisions.

TMO's success during the early stages of the debate irked its opposition. Numerous public officials who found their views or themselves the target of TMO critiques expressed concern about the group's agenda and tactics. TMO used direct confrontation—attending meetings en masse, putting tough questions to officials, and demanding that promises be put down in writing—among other methods. Texas Highway Commissioner Ray Barnhart accused TMO of using scare tactics to drum up opposition to the toll road plans. Barnhart said TMO “mobilized blacks, browns, and the elderly and then invaded city hall saying ‘they’re going to destroy our neighborhoods,’” without truly considering the importance of the highway.<sup>66</sup> Barnhart's overtly racist critique showed that some white Texans, including many traditional power brokers, still dismissed the political action of African Americans and Latinos as a nuisance and as illegitimate. The motivation for such attacks stemmed from the reality that TMO, with its multiracial, broad constituency, was making real political waves. Barnhart's blustering tried to cover up and dismiss the efficacy of the group, but his comments belied the fact that officials were both aware and wary of the growing political influence of TMO.

Leaders of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese and TMO staff responded to such hostility by arguing that the organization provided an essential organ for confronting the pressing problems of life in urban America. Joseph Fiorenza, the Galveston-Houston

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<sup>65</sup> Dick Bryant, “North Houston Next in Mass Transit Plans” *Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 1980, H-Toll Roads-1979-1982 VF, HMRC.

<sup>66</sup> Lynn Garner, “Highway Commissioner critical of opponents to toll road plan,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 1, 1980.

Diocesan Director for Social Action, urged leaders to resist allowing criticism to corral or cajole the Church into denying support to TMO.<sup>67</sup> Auxiliary Bishop John McCarthy responded directly to criticisms in a letter written to TMO member churches. McCarthy told leaders to continue their work with TMO, reminding them that “religiously committed people struggling for social justice have always encountered criticism, slander and worse. Continue your noble efforts to develop a strong multi-issued, ethnically diverse, widely based community organization.”<sup>68</sup> The responses of Catholic officials to these critiques strengthened the resolve of TMO members and emboldened them to continue the fight for the future of the Hardy corridor.

The corridor debate became a key part of the 1982 mayoral election. The election marked an end to the first stage of the city’s transportation debate and served as a launching pad for discussion of the 1983 referenda. It also represented the high point of TMO’s influence and political power in the city. Amplified by the group’s involvement with the corridor fight, TMO’s agenda received a huge amount of attention during the election, leading to promises ranging from service improvement in black and Latino neighborhoods to immigration reform from candidates.<sup>69</sup> The group’s participation in the race and their vocal role in the transit debate mirrored the actions of African American and ethnic Mexican residents during the Harrisburg, HARTA, and METRO fights. In all four of these campaigns, Houstonians challenged political officials and forwarded their own visions about the city’s transportation structures. In the November election, Houstonians elected Kathy Whitmire, whom TMO endorsed. After the election, TMO continued to push its agenda upon the mayor they helped elect, giving special emphasis to their concerns about the Hardy corridor.

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from Joseph Fiorenza to Diocesan Priests, June 6, 1979, Correspondence Folder, CCF, AAGH.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from McCarthy to TMO leaders, May 8, 1980.

<sup>69</sup> Nene Foxhall, “Mayoral Candidates Face Tough Queries,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 27, 1981, 12.

## THE ACCELERATING DEBATE

If the 1982 mayoral election signaled the peak of TMO's influence, the ensuing transit debate marked its waning. After Whitmire's election, Houstonians who felt the rail program would hurt the city's growth refused to let TMO, mass transit advocates, and METRO dictate regional transportation policy. Suburban officials and residents, the Houston Chamber of Commerce, and other toll road advocates began to push back against the early momentum enjoyed by rail backers.

The Houston Chamber of Commerce waded into the transit debate with the release of its Regional Mobility Plan just weeks after Kathy Whitmire's election. Given Houston's lack of zoning and subsequently weak planning department, the reports of groups like the Chamber held great weight in city discussions.<sup>70</sup> The plan called for a \$16.2 billion program that, while not directly dismissing rail, clearly emphasized road-based improvements on the grounds that such projects were far cheaper and could be built faster than higher-cost rail projects. The plan called for the construction of almost 300 miles of new freeways, 1,400 miles of new arterial streets, and 30 miles of transitways. It also sought an expansion of the bus fleet, the widening of nearly 200 miles of existing freeways, and the resurfacing of older roadways.<sup>71</sup> It assented that rail and other high-cost projects could eventually be built, but only once "travel demands cannot be met by lower cost options," i.e., roads.<sup>72</sup> Initially the report garnered support, or at least praise, from many groups, including TMO, for bringing the thoughts of almost all the major transportation agencies and advocates into one document.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 164.

<sup>71</sup> Houston Chamber of Commerce, Regional Mobility Plan, February 1982, HGAC Transportation Department Library, i.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>73</sup> SHPTC Public Hearing, March 16, 1982, Box 1990/11-1, Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Public Hearing Dockets, 1979-1988, TSA, 16. All of the local political powers sent

Despite these plaudits, however, TMO harbored a number of concerns about the Regional Mobility Plan. Just as with the group's quick attacks on the TTA, TMO wasted no time in laying out its critiques of the report. Most of its objections focused on the broad "financial, social, and environmental problems they believed would result" from the program. Unsurprisingly, TMO offered particularly strong criticism of the plan's pro-toll road stance for the Hardy corridor, its general road-based emphasis, and its apparent lack of citizen input. They lamented its continued reliance on automobiles and again called for a system that could "begin now to provide alternatives" to roads and cars.<sup>74</sup>

In response to the TMO criticism, the Houston Chamber of Commerce and pro-toll road Houstonians defiantly championed the Hardy Toll Road and the wider road network. In a supplemental report to the Regional Mobility Plan, the Chamber concluded that toll roads were the most economically viable choice and maintained that the Hardy route would result in fewer displacements than earlier road projects.<sup>75</sup> In their eyes, the benefits of the road outweighed the costs it would engender. Citizens for Better Transportation, a coalition of suburban residents and businesses that sprouted up during the debate, joined the Chamber in supporting the toll roads. The group played a major role in the referendum debates, often directly engaging with TMO in exchanges that displayed the growing antagonism between suburban and city residents.<sup>76</sup>

The Regional Mobility Plan accelerated METRO's rail plans. Hoping to act before road construction could impede its agenda METRO announced a new rail plan in

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a representative to this public hearing to express support for the RMP; Press Release from Jan Wilbur, TMO Co-Chair, February 26, 1982, Box 1, Folder 18, HSTRCC, HMRC.

<sup>74</sup> TMO Mass Transit Position Paper, February 25, 1982, Box 1, Folder 6, HSTRCC, 10; SHPTC, Public Hearing, March 16, 1982, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Houston Chamber of Commerce, "Houston And Regional Mobility, Plans into Action: North Corridor and Hardy Road," July 1982, Box 1, Folder 8, HSTRCC.

<sup>76</sup> Laurie Paternoster, "Citizen Groups Unite to Support Proposed Hardy Toll road," *Houston Post*, April 28, 1982, H-Toll Roads—1979-1982 VF, HMRC.

September 1982. The updated proposal called for an 18.2-mile heavy rail line to run through both the Westpark and Hardy corridors along what the agency called the “spine corridor” (Figure 6.4). The plan was the brainchild of Alan Kiepper, who quietly commissioned a feasibility study for the broader system using \$28 million in federal funding shortly after his arrival in Houston. Only after the METRO board released the plan did Kiepper make the work his agency conducted public.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 6.4: METRO Proposal

The proposed route of METRO’s spine corridor rail plan. The solid line represents the 18.2 mile first section. The dotted lines are proposed future extensions. The line from “Downtown” north runs through the Hardy Corridor. METRO, “Regional Transit Program: Metro Stage One,” October 1982, Texas Department of Transportation, Planning Department Document Library, Houston, Texas.

<sup>77</sup> “Rail System Has Been Planned Quietly for Months with Little Public Input” *Houston Chronicle*, September 30, 1982, Box 1, Folder 21, HSTRCC.

METRO moved toward implementation immediately, beginning the process of right-of-way purchasing and preparing for the first stage of construction, which together would cost \$190 million.<sup>78</sup>

Rail opponents criticized METRO's adjusted proposal and scrambled to respond. Jon Lindsay accused the agency of overreaching its authority, ignoring the Regional Mobility Plan, and unilaterally forcing an expensive project upon residents. METRO's actions spurred suburbanites from north Houston, backed by some of the largest developers and corporations of the area, to form the North Houston Association in November 1982, to oppose the expanded rail plan. Citizens for Better Transportation and the North Houston Association together claimed 250,000 members and put that constituency to work pressuring the Houston City Council and Mayor Kathy Whitmire to support the toll road proposal.<sup>79</sup>

While neither Council nor Whitmire took definitive action on the toll road plan, the political pressure of road supporters did secure a guarantee that the rail plan would be put before voters. The 1973 and 1978 votes provided precedent for such a referendum. Given the results of the 1978 election and despite its early hiccups, METRO officials felt confident that a vote would result in the passage of the rail plan. Surveys the Authority conducted during the debate corroborated this confidence with as many as 77 percent of Houstonians saying they supported the rail system.<sup>80</sup> As 1982 came to a close, Whitmire

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<sup>78</sup> "Metro to Spend \$190 Million for Land," *Houston Chronicle*, October 4, 1982, H-MTA Rail, 1980-1982 VF, HMRC; Jan Rich, "Metro to Exercise Eminent Domain Right," *Houston Chronicle*, September 8, 1982, H-Transportation-1982 VF, HMRC.

<sup>79</sup> Jan Rich, "New Group Forms on Toll Road," *Houston Chronicle*, November 19, 1982, H-Toll Roads—1979-1982 VF, HMRC.

<sup>80</sup> "Kiepper Defends Metro 'El' as Resuscitation for Downtown," *Houston Chronicle*, November 3, 1982, Box 1, Folder 21, HSTRCC.

called for the scheduling of a referendum on the rail plan and Kiepper assented, despite his own desires to begin construction immediately.<sup>81</sup>

METRO's announcement prompted Jon Lindsay to take action on formally creating the HCTRA. Working with State Representative Erwin Barton, Lindsay submitted a bill to the Texas State Legislature that gave Harris County permission to form a toll road agency.<sup>82</sup> As his plan moved through the legislature, Lindsay wrote to Houston City Councilman Dale Gorczynski to convince him of the merits of the HCTRA and to seek a compromise between tollway and rail supporters. Lindsay promised that the county did not intend to ride roughshod over the city or its citizens. Further he reiterated that METRO and the HCTRA could work together to improve the metropolitan area's transportation. After offering these conciliations, however, Lindsay made it clear that he would not let TMO or pro-rail opposition spoil his toll road plans. The region's "rapidly deteriorating traffic situation indicates it's past time for plans and studies...it's time for someone to pour concrete."<sup>83</sup>

#### **SETTLING THE DEBATE: THE REFERENDA**

With Lindsay's HCTRA proposal out in the open, the 1983 transit debates assumed their final form. The April 1983 public forum once more sheds light onto how

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<sup>81</sup> "Mayor Expects MTA to Call for Vote to Finance Rail Plan," *Houston Post*, November 4, 1982, H-MTA Rail, 1980-1982 VF, HMRC; "Bond Election Predicted for Rail Plan," *Houston Chronicle*, November 4, 1982, Box 1, Folder 21, HSTRCC. Dan Arnold also discussed METRO hesitancy to schedule a referendum on the rail proposal. Both Kiepper and the METRO board wanted to get construction under way as quickly as possible and did not think a vote was required. A March 1983 referendum was delayed by Mayor Whitmire's request. This delay frustrated Arnold and Kiepper. See Dan Arnold, interview by author, January 31, 2012. Laurie Paternoster, "Metro Officials Accuse Mayor of Blocking Vote," *Houston Post*, February 23, 1983, H-Transportation-MTA Rail VF, HMRC.

<sup>82</sup> "Lindsay Leaning Toward County Responsibility for Toll road," *Houston Post*, March 22, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC. For text of the bill see <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/> SB 970, 68<sup>th</sup> legislature Regular Session, last accessed on November 9, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from County Judge Jon Lindsay to Councilman Dale Gorczynski, March 23, 1983, Box 1, Folder 13, HSTRCC.

this debate was joined. The rail and toll road proponents openly clashed at the meeting. Both sides accused the councilmembers of catering to the interests of the other. Addressing the meeting, a TMO member and Hardy Corridor resident asserted that far from anti-progress “vigilantes,” he and his neighbors were “citizens, taxpayers, and voters” who simply did not want the toll road to “uproot homes for the benefit of just a few people.” Another corridor resident, Ramiro Villareal, promised to support any proposal that did not force him and his family to “find new homes, new churches, new friends, and new ways of life.” Road proponents responded to this passionate plea by reiterating that Hardy Street presented “a natural corridor coming out of central Houston,” and that the toll road plan presented “a once in a lifetime opportunity.”<sup>84</sup>

The two perspectives presented in the breakout session demonstrated the deep divide between suburban and corridor residents over the future shape of the area and its meaning in their lives. Supporters of each system possessed wholly different conceptions of the Hardy Corridor as a physical landscape. To area residents, the debate concerned the future of their homes. To suburban commuters, the corridor simply presented an “opportunity” for improved mobility. For the remainder of the debate, corridor residents focused on preventing negative physical changes to their communities, while suburbanites concentrated on easing their commute. When METRO released a supplemental draft environmental impact statement on the rail system, corridor residents celebrated its conclusion that rail rapid transit represented the best path forward. The report stated that a rail line would result in less air pollution and necessitate fewer displacements than the toll road.<sup>85</sup> Much of the transit debate pivoted on these hyper-local

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<sup>84</sup> “City Council Hearing on Hardy Toll Project Draws 300,” *North Freeway Leader*, April 28, 1983, Box 1, Folder 22, HSTRCC.

<sup>85</sup> Urban Mass Transit Administration; METRO, “Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement: Houston Rail Rapid Transit Project,” March 1983, MBC, WRC, 5-2, 5-3.



concerns. Houstonians supported the system they felt best matched their individual interests.

**“JUST A RAIL BAD DAY FOR METRO”<sup>86</sup>**

While METRO officials preferred to start construction on the rail system without a vote, Kiepper and others did not want to jeopardize the agency’s steadily improving reputation. Begrudgingly, the agency scheduled the vote for June 11, 1983. While the referendum potentially represented a clear path for the construction of the system, it also placed the fate of the plan solely in the hands of voters. The risk for METRO was clear. As agency leaders acknowledged, if the vote failed they had no financial backup plan and would be left adrift.<sup>87</sup>

During the lead up to the June referendum, it became clear that no matter the outcome, the balanced transportation approach of the previous decade would be abandoned. Given the growing city-suburb divide, only one side would get what it wanted. Local officials, community groups, and voters lined up behind the rail proposal or made their opposition clear. The makeup of the two sides held few surprises. City leaders mostly backed the rail plan and many county officials stood firmly in opposition. The majority of city residents, mainly working- and middle-class Houstonians of all races, expressed support for rail. Many elite white Houstonians and most white suburbanites did not. Two interesting exceptions to expected allegiances did emerge. First was the West Houston Association, a consortium of businesses located near the western terminus of the proposed rail line in the Galleria area, which supported the rail. While the rationale for the WHA’s support was clearly economically motivated, they

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<sup>86</sup> “MTA Bond Plan Soundly Defeated: Just a Rail Bad Day for Metro,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 12, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>87</sup> “Metro Combines Rail, Bus Expansion Projects into 1 Bond Election,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 6, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC

were nonetheless one of the few business groups to support the system. On the anti-rail side, the most unexpected action was Judge Lindsay's relative silence. Despite the energy he poured into pushing against the plan, Lindsay refused to endorse or oppose the referendum after its announcement, choosing to remain apart from a vote that did not directly involve his jurisdiction. Lindsay did make it known, however, that his focus remained on forming the HCTRA and pushing for its passage, a tacit statement of disapproval.<sup>88</sup>

While METRO campaigned throughout the HMA and aimed to convince a wide range of citizens to support the rail, just as with the 1973 and 1978 referenda, Authority officials believed that the support of the city's African American and Latino voters and politicians would be key to the success of the election. After working closely with METRO and TMO throughout the process, most HMA black and Latino politicians came out in support of the referendum. State Representative Anthony Hall voiced his approval once METRO forwarded a plan to bring rail to his southeast Houston district. State Representative Ben Reyes of east Houston pointed specifically to the jobs that the construction of the system would bring to many of his constituents as the primary rationale for his support.<sup>89</sup> METRO took these endorsements as a positive omen for the referendum's result.

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<sup>88</sup> "Groups Lining Up for, Against Metro Plan" *Houston Chronicle*, May 24, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC; "County AFL-CIO backs Metro Bond Referendum," *Houston Post*, June 2, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC; West Houston Association Press Release, May 26, 1983, Box 1, Folder: Busway Editorials, MBC, WRC.

<sup>89</sup> "Three Minority Councilmen Back June 11 Metro Bond Election," *Houston Chronicle*, June 2, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC; Laurie Paternoster, "Reyes Supports MTA Bond Referendum," *Houston Post*, June 7, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC; "Hispanos de Houston Apoyan Sistema De Tren-Autobus Del METRO," (Hispanics of Houston Support Train-Bus System of METRO), *El Sol*, June 8, 1983, Box 1982-1983, RG D 80, 45/143/B, HMRC, 1-2. A number of other prominent politicians and civic groups, both Latino and African American, supported the referendum, See *El Sol* "Election For" June 6, 1983, Box 1982-1983, HMRC, 1-3.

African American and Latino Houstonians who supported the rail proposal also promoted the system independent of their political leaders. Many black and Latino Houstonians active in TMO had campaigned against the Hardy Toll Road and likewise threw their support behind the rail plan. Black, white, and Latino members kept up a constant stream of editorials, attended meetings, and held rallies to encourage Houstonians to vote for rail. The community newspaper, *El Sol*, much as it had during the earlier 1978 METRO debate, endorsed the proposal after Alan Kiepper and other METRO officials held a meeting with Latino community leaders in May 1983.<sup>90</sup> The paper appealed to Houston's Latino residents to "turn out to the ballot box and vote." Echoing TMO's arguments against the toll road plan, *El Sol*'s editorial team pleaded that voters not let the "small but potent self-interest groups that oppose its passage" win the day. The paper urged its readers to "show Houston what the Hispanic and Mexican American community can do in unison" and vote for the referendum.<sup>91</sup>

Pro-rail groups also targeted black and Latino constituencies with advertisements in *El Sol*, *The Houston Defender*, and the *Houston Informer*. In *El Sol*, The Committee For Houston Bus and Rail—a consortium of rail supporters put together to campaign for the referendum—talked up the positive economic benefit the project would have both in terms of jobs and growth. It promised more buses, better service, and revamped facilities. It also warned voters that "the problems of transit are worse than we can Imagine!" and asserted that "Houston needs to plan—now!" Demonstrating the importance of local power brokers, the advertisements also listed the prominent leaders and politicians

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<sup>90</sup> "MTA," *El Sol*, May 11, 1983, Box 1982-1983, HMRC, 4; "Junio 11 Voto para Financiamiento del Metro" (June 11 Vote for the METRO Bonds), *El Sol*, May 18, 1983, Box 1982-1983, HMRC, 1.

<sup>91</sup> "Get Out the Vote," *El Sol*, June 8, 1983, Box 1982-1983, HMRC, 3.

supporting the referendum.<sup>92</sup> Ads placed in the *Informer* and *Defender* took the same approach (Figure 6.5 and 6.6).<sup>93</sup>

While rail supporters campaigned for passage of the rail bonds, opponents sharpened their critiques. If many pro-tollway politicians refrained from directly criticizing the rail plan, their supporters did not. White suburban community groups like the Cypress Creek United Civic Association and Meyerland Community Improvement

**"No" to Houston Bus & Rail on June 11 means better public transportation for our whole community.**

# WE CARE ENOUGH ABOUT YOUR VOTE ON JUNE 11TH TO ASK FOR IT.

**WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT TO GET HOUSTON MOVING!**

"Yes" to Houston Bus & Rail means more bus service improvements—more buses, more bus facilities, cross-town transfer centers, more bus shelters, permanent median busways and rapid rail transit to make our transit system complete. This system will get you where you want to go and faster.

Building a first rate transportation system will mean jobs, just when they're needed most.

At least 9,000 jobs a year during the major construction period and more for the transfer centers, Park & Ride lots, median busways and bus maintenance facilities. Your "Yes" vote on June 11 will get you to work faster with no increase in your taxes.

"Yes" for Houston Bus & Rail has the support of people like you who are concerned about Houston's future. They urge you to vote June 11 and to vote "Yes".

Richard E. Battle Democrat Bill Calhoun John Chao, Sr. Dr. John S. Coleman David Collins Rufus Conley Robert J. Derfigne Larry Evans State Representative Edna Jones Fenneman Louis Fipps Harry Green Anthony Hill Houston City Council Barthie Masters James O. Hunsinger Rev. C. L. Jackson Judge Andrew Jefferson	Willie C. Jordan Albert L. Jurek, Jr. Arthur S. Kaminick Rev. Bill Lammson El Franco Lee, State Representative Moby Leland, U.S. Representative Morris Mosley Harold Quinn Julius Robinson Houston City Council Stanley A. Shoup Sandra Green Smith Dr. Leonard Spelman Saulberry Thompson, State Representative Rev. John Hill Westbrook Clay White S. T. Williams, Jr.
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**YES FOR HOUSTON BUS & RAIL**

This political advertising sold by the Committee for Houston Bus and Rail, 605 North, North, San Leon and Dr. Dennis Cook, Co-Chairmen.

**Houston Necesita PLANEAR - AHORA!**

## Los Problemas de Transito Son Peores de lo que nos Imaginamos!

El tráfico que le causa a usted problemas a diario, está empeorando en todos los días y a la vez está afectando el futuro de Houston y su propio.

El Referendum del 11 de Junio le dará el 80% del dinero necesario para poner a Houston en movimiento. Con los bonds se tendrá el dinero necesario que necesitamos para mantener y para realizar un sistema completo de transito.

Cuando los negocios y la industria se quedan inmóviles en Houston, usted se quedará en Houston. Esto brinda grandes oportunidades de trabajo para crear y construir un futuro mejor. Y Houston podría llegar a ser una ciudad grande en movimiento.

El Houston Bus & Rail es una respuesta. Comparte una ciudad de nuestro tamaño. Tiene más autobuses y un sistema integrado de transito que puede transportar a la gente a dondequiera que van. Houston está creciendo, ahorrando y dar el primer paso, el cual es grande, es más difícil en su propia.

Más autobuses, más facilidades, más Park and Ride lots, más estaciones de transferencia, permanentes rutas de autobuses y un rápido sistema de rail, tendrá un sistema completo. 78.5 miles de rail y 17 estaciones para 1989 y muchos proyectos más.

Y otro importante beneficio inmediato, el programa de autobuses y rail será la creación de 8,000 trabajos nuevos durante su periodo de construcción.

¡Organizadores de trabajo que se necesitan ahora! VOTE SI!

**Final Endorsement List**  
Houston Area Association of Councils  
4th June 11, 1983 Panel Endorsement

Joseph Canale Houston Area Association of Councils	Joseph P. Ford Houston Area Association of Councils	Charles A. Jones Houston Area Association of Councils	John W. Smith Houston Area Association of Councils
Paul E. White Houston Area Association of Councils	John W. Smith Houston Area Association of Councils	John W. Smith Houston Area Association of Councils	John W. Smith Houston Area Association of Councils

**Vote Si!** **Sábado, Junio 11**

¡ SU VOTO SI NO RESULTARA EN Incrementación De Sus Impuestos

Figure 6.5 and 6.6: Pro-rail advertisements  
Ads in support of rail taken out in African American and Latino community newspapers. Figure 6.5, *Houston Defender*, May 20, 1983, HMRC. Figure 6.6, *El Sol*, June 8, 1983, HMRC.

Association initiated letter-writing campaigns and published editorials attacking the rail plans.<sup>94</sup> Playing on Houston and Texas's self-governing ethos, David Legge, the editor of

<sup>92</sup> "Los Problemas de Transito Son Peores de lo que nos Imaginamos," Advertisement. *El Sol*, June 8, 1983, Box 1982-1983, HMRC, 16.  
<sup>93</sup> "To Get Houston Moving is a Job for Us All," Advertisement, June 11, 1983, *Houston Informer*, HMRC; "We Care Enough About your Vote on June 11 to Ask for It," Advertisement, *Houston Defender*, May 20, 1983, HMRC.

*Houston City Magazine*, also criticized the rail plan. Legge argued that “Houston...is the least likely candidate for heavy rail in America. It’s spread out, free-spirited, and independent-minded.”<sup>95</sup> Legge went on to suggest that support for the rail plan was tantamount to supporting the infringement of the individual rights so sacred to many Texans. Through this tactic Legge changed the nature of the vote from METRO’s vision of freedom via a new transport mode into one that represented rail as a power grab by a government agency. For many, especially those still unconvinced by METRO’s overall effort, this tactic proved convincing.

Despite this vocal criticism, in the days before the election, the momentum, as it did in 1973, appeared to be on the side of passage. A *Houston Chronicle* article pointed out that proponents of the rail plan outspent their opponents by a wide margin. With three days remaining before the election, the Committee for Houston Bus and Rail had spent \$114,657 of an estimated \$185,000 raised on the campaign. In comparison, two opposition groups—The Neighborhood Forum and Citizens for Better Transportation—reported expenditures of little more than \$15,000.<sup>96</sup> Given this financial advantage, the support of many prominent Houstonians like Bus and Rail Committee Chair Ben Love, and the commitment by many black, Latino, and white city residents, METRO officials felt positively about the chances of the referendum’s passage.

Writing on the day of the rail referendum, *Houston Post* columnist Lynn Ashby defended METRO’s efforts during its first four years of existence and urged voters to support the rail plan. While the opposition had a right to ask questions of METRO and its

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Cypress Creek United Civic Associations to Lindsay, June 3, 1983, Box 999, Folder 18, JJLP, HCA; “M.C.I.A. Directors Oppose M.T.A Bond Proposal June 11,” *The Meyerlander*, June 1983, Vol. 14, No. 1, Folder—Editorials, Box 1, MBC, WRC.

<sup>95</sup> David Legge, “Vote No on Heavy Rail,” *Houston City Magazine*, June 1983, Box 2, Folder--MTA Postmortem, MBC, WRC, 120.

<sup>96</sup> Jan Rich, “Metro Bond Election Gains more Support,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 7, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC.

plans, Ashby feared they had gone too far—becoming impediments to progress rather than paragons of the democratic process. Inverting Legge’s version of Texas self-governance, he reminded fellow Houstonians that their city “was not turned from a backwater village on an unknown bayou into the fastest-growing city in the nation by a bunch of whiners and naysayers. It was built by doers.” After delivering this admonition, Ashby called on voters to go to the polls and to support the referendum.<sup>97</sup>

To any Houstonian who could remember the 1973 HARTA election, June 12, 1983, must have dawned with an extreme sense of déjà vu. Just as in 1973, nearly two-thirds of voters rejected a transit referendum that looked destined to pass only weeks earlier. METRO officials expressed shock and disappointment, with many blaming low voter turnout in areas of expected support and a lack of voter understanding as the root causes of the referendum’s defeat. Just 110,978 voters, approximately 12 percent of those Houstonians who lived within the Authority’s jurisdiction, cast a ballot.<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately for supporters of transit, those who turned out overwhelmingly opposed the rail. The geographic distribution of “no” votes reflected continued suburban disdain for “Houston-centric” transit plans as suburban precincts such as those in Fort Bend County rejected the referendum by ratios approaching 3-to-1. In addition, the vote expressed the trepidation held by the wealthier residents who lived along the proposed Westpark segment of the system and likewise voted down the proposal.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Lynn Ashby, “We Can Gripe Until Eternity; Now’s the Time for MTA Vote,” *Houston Post*, June 11, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>98</sup> Voting numbers from official referendum election results for June 11, 1983 Metropolitan Transit Authority Bond Election, Harris County Clerk’s Office, Houston, Texas. Number of registered voters, Laurie Paternoster, “MTA Bond Plan Election Today,” *Houston Post*, June 11, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC. In other elections the turnout usually hovered around 4 or 5 percent.

<sup>99</sup> Nene Foxhall, “Rejection of Bond Issue Crossed Geographic Lines,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 12, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC; “MTA Bond Plan Soundly Defeated,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 12, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC. Full, precinct-by-precinct results are available at the Harris County Clerk’s office, Houston, Texas.

The rejection of the rail plan led to three major outcomes. First, it vaulted the HCTRA agenda to the fore of metropolitan transportation politics. Second, it resulted in the loss of federal funding for mass transit in Houston. Third, it shifted METRO's agenda toward meeting suburban mobility needs. Furthermore, given the fact that African American and Latino Houstonians had given the referendum staunch backing, its failure marked the first time in nearly a decade that minority votes had failed to swing an HMA transportation vote. The fact that these voters had combined their votes with many white rail supporters and still lost also demonstrated the limits of city-based political power in the increasingly suburbanizing HMA.

The rejection of the referendum almost immediately resulted in a redistribution of earmarked federal transportation funds. Members of the House committee that promised Houston the money for the project if the referendum succeeded announced that they would be sending a \$110 million meant for Houston to other cities. They lamented the fact that "one of the nation's most promising" transit projects had fallen apart. Houston-area national politicians also began to back away from their efforts to secure transit dollars. U.S. Representative Jack Fields, one of the leaders who brought money to the project, announced that he would cease all efforts to attain federal funding.<sup>100</sup> U.S. Senators Lloyd Bentsen and John Tower, each of who were instrumental in convincing the Department of Transportation to keep some mass transit funding in its budget, expressed disappointment at the defeat and wasted allocation.<sup>101</sup> The rejection of the rail referendum made it unlikely that national leaders would support such an ambitious plan in Houston any time soon.

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<sup>100</sup> Jim Craig, "Rep. Fields calls on MTA to Drop Federal Funds Bid" *Houston Post*, June 13, 1983, H-Elections-MTA Rail-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>101</sup> "Thinking Small Derails Big Bucks for Houston," *Washington Post*, June 16, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC; "House Panel Approves Bill Reallocating Houston's 104.5 million Share of Transit Funds," *Houston Post*, June 17, 1983, Box 1, Folder 22, HSTRCC.

After the referendum defeat, METRO faced, as one newspaper article put it, “soul-searching time.”<sup>102</sup> Having invested between \$50 and \$90 million into the system’s planning, preparation, and engineering, the agency stood at a crossroads, faced with several ways forward.<sup>103</sup> Even as they shut down the preliminary work started in anticipation of the referendum’s passage, Authority officials weighed the possibility of returning to voters with a different plan in the coming months. Regardless of how they moved forward, Alan Kiepper, acknowledged that the defeat “shot us [METRO] down pretty solidly...We are eating Humble Pie...We thought we had a good plan, but we’ll have to come up with another one.”<sup>104</sup> METRO responded to the defeat by announcing that it would start long-term transit planning anew, with a special focus on bringing citizen feedback into any new proposal.<sup>105</sup> METRO’s next transit proposal, which took more than a year to create, oriented the agency in a new direction—toward the suburbs. Because of the sound defeat of the 1983 rail plan, the agency conceded that it needed to account for suburban needs, a decision that caused shifts to the region’s mobility choices for the next twenty years.

### **TOLL ROADS RUSH IN**

Two days after the rail referendum, Jon Lindsay asserted that “the METRO bond election is now history” and asked Houstonians to support the creation of the HCTRA.<sup>106</sup> “The community is hungry for a solution to its traffic problems,” Lindsay insisted and

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<sup>102</sup> “Soul-Searching Time For Metro Officials,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 13, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>103</sup> “A \$93 Million Question: To Rail or not to Rail?” *Houston Post*, June 16, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC; “Metro Planners Estimate they Invested \$48 Million in Rail Plan,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 22, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>104</sup> Laurie Paternoster, “MTA Begins ‘Demobilizing’ Rail Program,” *Houston Post*, June 17, 1983, Box 1, Folder 22, HSTRCC.

<sup>105</sup> “Work Started to Define New Plan for Metro,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 27, 1983, H-MTA Rail April-December 1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Jon Lindsay to Houstonians, June 13, 1983, Box 2, Folder: Toll Roads, MBC, WRC.



toll roads represented the only feasible answer.<sup>107</sup> HCTRA supporters, learning from the defeat of the rail vote, painted the plan and its proposed system as one for the entire metropolitan area. (Figure 6.7) This tactic allowed the HCTRA to insulate the proposal from the fractious Hardy Toll Road debate. Lindsay and other officials recognized that, given the significant opposition that remained from groups like TMO, they might not be able to pass a stand-alone, yes/no referendum on the Hardy Toll Road. Instead, they lumped all of the proposed roads into one ballot measure, thereby ensuring wider support and capitalizing on Houstonians' general frustrations with traffic.<sup>108</sup>

Many Houston officials came over to the toll road camp after the rail defeat. Several former supporters of the rail plan realized that they would have to take a position on the toll road proposal, and more and more expressed support due to doubts that another transit plan would emerge.<sup>109</sup> Officials who had opposed the rail plan, including Councilman Goodner, lauded this embrace of the HCTRA plan and hoped that its quick passage might prove that Houston was not “negative on transportation.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Nene Foxhall, “Lindsay Taking bold approach on toll roads,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 31, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>108</sup> Bill Coulter, “County Sets Toll Roads Referendum,” *Houston Post*, June 24, 1983, Box 1, Folder 1, HSTRCC; Letter from Lindsay to Houstonians, June 13, 1983. Both Dan Arnold and John Sedlak referenced Lindsay’s choice to place the Hardy Toll Road in a larger package of HCTRA projects as a key factor in the subsequent successful election. Dan Arnold, interview by author, January 31, 2012; John Sedlak, interview by author, April 11, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> “City Council Prepares to Take Stand on Controversial Hardy Road Project” *Houston Post*, August 5, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>110</sup> Laurie Paternoster, “Two MTA Rail Bonds Opponents Back Toll Road Plan” *Houston Post*, August 10, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

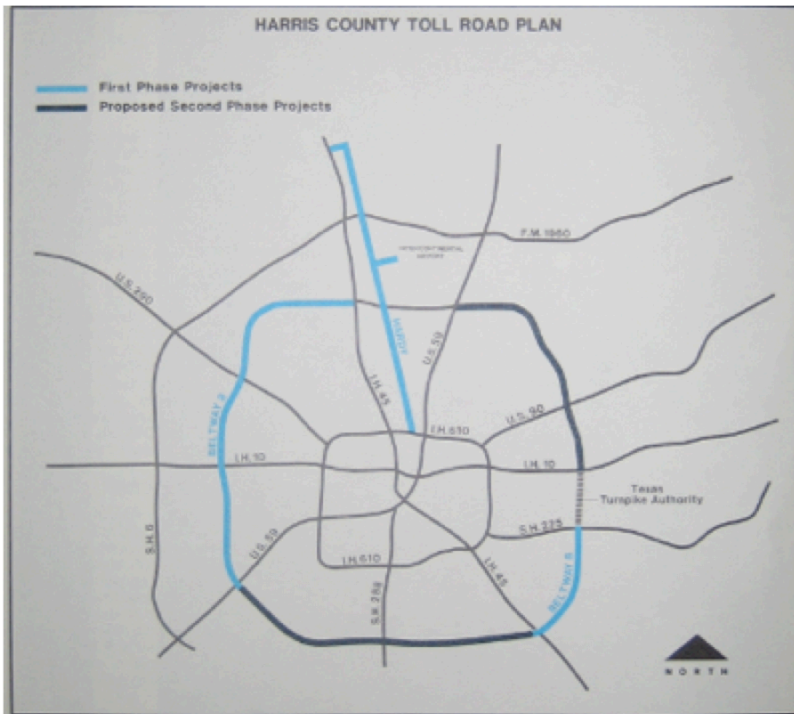


Figure 6.7: The HCTRA toll road proposal. The light blue lines represent the toll routes that would be built after the proposals passage, the dark blue, future routes. Absent from this early rendition is the Westpark toll road. Houston-Galveston Regional Transportation Study, October 1983, MBC, WRC, 5.

Goodner's line once more hinted at Houstonians' fear that continued problems with traffic, or even just the bad publicity of a divisive debate, could damage Houston's national reputation.

Despite the defeat of the rail plan, toll road opponents refused to allow the HCTRA's creation without a fight. Councilman Gorczynski, ignoring Judge Lindsay's earlier olive branch, helped form an anti-tollway group, Taxpayers Against Toll Road Bonds, which consisted of several TMO-supported politicians and other civic organizations sympathetic to the anti-tollway cause.<sup>111</sup> The group and TMO offered the most cohesive resistance to the HCTRA in the lead-up to the September 13 election day.

<sup>111</sup> "New Group Formed to Oppose Proposal or Toll Road Bonds" *Houston Chronicle*, August 12, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

Taxpayers Against Toll Road Bonds grounded most of its attacks in financial concerns about the system and the risks it brought to county taxpayers. The group projected, that with interest included, the actual cost of the toll system was projected to be \$2.35 billion, not the \$900 million county leaders estimated.<sup>112</sup>

TMO, which like METRO was reeling after the defeat of the rail referendum, once again focused on the Hardy corridor and attacked the developers and wealthy Houstonians they believed would benefit most directly from the Hardy Toll Road. During the HCTRA debate, the organization asked the Houston Conduct Review Board to initiate an official inquiry into possible conflicts of interest Houston City Council members had with the Hardy Corridor proposal. TMO argued that the fact that developer Walter Mischer Sr. owned significant acreage along the corridor and had donated money to twelve of the fifteen councilmembers constituted a conflict.<sup>113</sup> TMO's accusation infuriated the Houston City Council. While the review board quickly dismissed TMO's complaint, the levying of it stoked criticism of the group.<sup>114</sup> Several Catholic councilmen wrote a public letter to Bishop John Morkovsky, leader of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese, questioning the role of TMO in city politics and the Church's support of the organization. The councilmen labeled TMO's paid staff outside agitators and suggested that the group exploited poorer churches.<sup>115</sup> Bishop Morkovsky responded to the questions of the Council with unwavering support for TMO. He assured councilmembers that funding for TMO was secured voluntarily through member congregations using

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<sup>112</sup> TMO, "A Critique of Judge Lindsay's Toll Road Program," Box 1, Folder 1, HSTRCC

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Jan Wilbur to George Pletcher, August 19, 1983, Box 20, Folder 25, Ben T. Reyes Collection (BTRC), MSS 103, HMRC.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from George Pletcher to Jan Wilbur, September 8, 1983, Box 20, Folder 25, BTRC, HMRC.

<sup>115</sup> Letter from Houston City Councilmen Johnny Goyen, Judson Robinson Jr., Frank Mancuso, and Ben Reyes, to Bishop John Morkovsky, August 30, 1983, Box 20, Folder 25, BTRC, HMRC.

benefits and donations.<sup>116</sup> Despite the ongoing support, the lack of traction gained by TMO's critiques confirmed the group's declining political influence.

As TMO and toll road opponents searched for arguments that could cut into the HCTRA's momentum, the vote approached. Pro-toll road citizens helped form the Harris County Citizens for the Toll Road Alternative and released a pamphlet entitled "Restoring Mobility" that argued the passage of the referendum would create regional mobility and that its failure would mean continued congestion.<sup>117</sup>

Toll road proponents trumpeted the system's ability to bring mobility to the entire city. The Chamber of Commerce stumped hard for the referendum, highlighting the promises of the Regional Mobility Plan and telling voters that a "yes" vote for toll roads was a "vote for mobility."<sup>118</sup> Toll road proponents' focus on easing congestion hit a chord with many Houstonians who were sick of sitting in traffic. Even those who did not feel strongly about the toll road plan leaned toward supporting it simply to see some sort of action take place. In the days before the election, *Houston Post* columnist Lynn Ashby, who had also supported the rail referendum, reflected this attitude when he wrote a column supporting the toll road plan. While he continued to lament the missed opportunity represented by the failure of the rail referendum, Ashby, nearly parroting toll road proponents' arguments, asserted that the toll road plan at least gave the city "a second chance to do something about our traffic." Ashby concluded that in the face of feeble state and federal funding, the user fee model of the toll road plan was a necessary

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<sup>116</sup> Letter from Bishop John L. Morkovsky to Judson Robinson, Jr., et. al., September 14, 1983, Box 20, Folder 25, BTRC, HMRC.

<sup>117</sup> Pamphlet from Harris County Citizens For The Toll Road Alternative, Box 1, Folder 1, HSTRCC, HMRC.

<sup>118</sup> "An opportunity to Vote for Mobility" *Houston Magazine*, August 1983, HMRC, 73; Laurie Paternoster, "Return to 'Menu' Planned if Voters Reject Toll Road," *Houston Post*, September 13, 1983, H-Toll Roads VF, HMRC.

evil. Summing up the situation, Ashby concluded “we either build these needed roads ourselves or the job doesn’t get done.”<sup>119</sup>

On September 13, 1983, Harris County electorate, which was 100,000 people larger than the METRO electorate, overwhelmingly approved the HCTRA. In an inversion of the rail referendum results 95,524 (70 percent) county residents approved the bonds and 40,055 (30 percent) voted against. With 12 percent of eligible county voters weighing in, more than double other contemporary county elections, the importance of the vote was clear.<sup>120</sup> Lindsay said the victory showed that Harris Country was not going to sit idle as its traffic piled up. Suburban civic groups and officials that supported the bonds celebrated their victory.<sup>121</sup>

The toll referendum’s result highlighted the efficacy of both toll road proponents’ metropolitan mobility pitch and the limitations of place-based political stances. The defeated TMO begrudgingly admitted that its singular focus on the Hardy Corridor during both referenda hurt its chances in each.<sup>122</sup> The toll road vote was yet another blow to TMO. Its inability to muster much of a turnout and the sound defeat of its preferred action gave another sign of its waning influence.<sup>123</sup> Further, the success of the referendum meant that the communities of many corridor residents would soon be changed forever. If passage of the HCTRA presaged TMO’s decline, it signified the

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<sup>119</sup> Lynn Ashby, “Houston’s Tollway Plan Hardly a Road to Ruin” *Houston Post*, September 11, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>120</sup> “County Voters OK Toll Road Referendum,” *Houston Post*, September 14, 1983, Box 1, Folder 22, HSTRCC, HMRC. Election results also available at the Harris County Clerk’s office.

<sup>121</sup> The Papers of Houston City Councilwoman Eleanor Tinsley contain numerous letters of support for the HCTRA. Almost all of the letters came from Harris County groups outside of the immediate city such as the Humble Chamber of Commerce, the North Houston Association, and the Cypress Creek United Civic Associations. There is also a sheet listing the numerous supporting organizations. See ETC, Box 74, Folder 4, HMRC for the letters and list.

<sup>122</sup> “County Voters OK Toll Road Referendum,” *Houston Post*, September 14, 1983.

<sup>123</sup> “Toll Roads will Help, but the Traffic Problem Still Must Be Faced” *Houston Chronicle*, September 18, 1983, Folder 19, Box 13, 2009-028, Sarah and Army Emmott Records, SCLUH.

arrival of suburban residents and business leaders as new regional powers. Nothing made these political shifts as clear as the financial details of the HCTRA campaigns. Pro-toll road groups raised more than \$400,000 to support the referendum. On the other hand, the toll road opponents could muster no outside funding for their campaign against the proposal, a significant shift from the support they found during the rail push and a signal, perhaps, that most Houstonians wanted to move forward with some form of solution.<sup>124</sup>

Harris County moved quickly on the toll roads after the vote. The Commissioners Court created the Authority on September 22.<sup>125</sup> By early 1984, plans for acquiring right-of-way in the Hardy corridor were under way. Ultimately, the county removed 70 homes and 54 businesses and another 500 properties were affected.<sup>126</sup> Hoping to accelerate the acquisition process and speed construction, a number of developers and landowners along the Hardy corridor donated nearly 14 percent of the total right-of-way, land valued at \$6 million, to the county.<sup>127</sup> The alacrity with which the county moved to build the toll system was a product of Houstonians' intense demand for a resolution to the city's congestion. Ground was broken on the Hardy Toll Road in September 1984. On the same day that bulldozers made the ceremonial cuts in the earth, the HCTRA announced that it would be accelerating the construction process and aiming to have the Hardy Toll Road opened to traffic, and collecting fares, by July 1988.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Laurie Paternoster, "Toll Backers spent \$413,992 Records Show," *Houston Post*, October 13, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC; "444,992 Spent in Toll Road Campaign," *Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>125</sup> Bill Coulter, "Toll Road Authority Created," *Houston Post*, September 23, 1983, H-Toll Road-1983 VF, HMRC.

<sup>126</sup> "County to Acquire Property to Build Hardy Toll Road," *Houston Chronicle*, February 16, 1984, H-Toll Road-1984 VF, HMRC.

<sup>127</sup> Stephen Johnson, "Land Donated to Construct New Toll Road," *Houston Chronicle*, April 24, 1984, H-Toll Road-1984 VF, HMRC.

<sup>128</sup> "Hardy Toll Road Opening Advanced," *Houston Post*, September 14, 1984, H-Toll Road-1984 VF, HMRC.

## CONCLUSION

Hundreds of bicycles rushed down the smooth lanes of the Hardy Toll Road in September of 1987. Almost exactly four years after the passage of the inaugural HCTRA bonds, the northern section of the roadway opened to great fanfare: a parade, marching bands, and a bike race took over the road during the celebrations.<sup>129</sup> Two years later, the pop band the Bangles headlined a concert from a stage built across the surface of the new Sam Houston Tollway (Beltway 8) in celebration of that road's official opening, playing for 25,000 people.<sup>130</sup>

These celebrations announced more than just the completion of two toll roads. To many, the opening of the roads represented the attainment of relief from congestion, a decades-long goal in Houston. To others, especially to those Houstonians who had engaged in the heated 1983 debates, the inauguration of the roads marked a significant place in the struggle to influence the growth of the city. For those on the winning side of the debates, the roads represented the embrace of their hopes for the city. For those who had resisted the highways, the opening was a reminder of their inability to see their visions for the future upheld. No matter how one framed its significance, though, the opening of the toll roads undeniably established both Houston's highway-centric development pattern and its suburb-first transportation planning.

After 1983, TMO's influence in city politics declined precipitously for reasons that went beyond the ability of suburban areas to outvote the city in metropolitan debates. The oil bust of the 1980s crippled Houston's economy and left many Houstonians unemployed and impoverished. The pressures of poverty undoubtedly affected the ability of some TMO members to devote time and money to the organization. In addition to

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<sup>129</sup> "Bicycle, Party Hardy on the Toll Road," *Houston Post*, September 18, 1987, H-Toll Road-1985-89 VF, HMRC.

<sup>130</sup> Norma Martin, "Crowd Celebrates Toll Road Opening," *Houston Chronicle*, July 16, 1989, H-Toll Road-1985-89 VF, HMRC.

personal circumstances, the recession exacerbated many of the problems that TMO had tried to address within the city during the early 1980s. However, because the city now possessed so few resources to devote to social programs or with which to try to improve the condition of schools, streets, and police service anywhere, the complaints of TMO became just one in a long backlog of problems the city faced during the 1980s. The recession also accelerated the flight of white-collar workers of all races out of Houston and re-inscribed de facto segregation across the HMA based on both income and race. The economic and social distance these processes placed between working-class and middle-class Houstonians of all races made coalitions like TMO increasing harder to build. Finally, the rise of suburbs and conservative politics cannot be underestimated. The ascent of the Republican Party to power in suburban Houston and Texas led to increased animosity between cities and suburbs. Newly elected Republican leaders and the constituencies that supported them maintained their resistance to supporting projects in the city of Houston, often preventing county and state aid from reaching the city. Weakened by political defeat, the economic struggles of its membership and Houston, and challenged by the conservative politics of the Houston suburbs and the federal government, TMO, like community organizations across the country, shifted away from direct confrontational tactics and embraced new forms of organization that meshed more easily with the political moment.<sup>131</sup> While city residents by no means stopped participating in metropolitan debates, all of these factors gave their suburban neighbors the upper hand.

Given this new metropolitan political order, METRO, county and city officials increasingly catered to the needs of suburban residents.<sup>132</sup> Because they often ignored

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<sup>131</sup> Fisher, *Let the People Decide*, 176-209.

<sup>132</sup> Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 185-262. John Sedlak agrees that the result of the 1983 referendum pushed the agency toward greater suburban emphasis. John Sedlak, interview by author, April 11, 2012.



jurisdictional lines, transportation decisions illustrated this reality better than most other metropolitan topics. The creation of the HCTRA so quickly after the rejection of the rail plan forced METRO officials to reevaluate their future plans. In line with the region's car-centric growth and realigning political realities, the Authority embraced a suburb-focused system. METRO continued the improvement plan it began in the early 1980s: increasing bus service, reducing maintenance problems, improving safety. In addition, the agency prioritized travel between the central city and the suburbs. To meet this goal METRO built more Park and Ride lots and opened HOV lanes on almost every highway.

After spending the first year after the referenda implementing changes intended to meet suburban mobility needs, METRO unveiled three potential options for its mass transit program in 1984. The options put forward, however, reflected the agency's suburban orientation, as none aimed to improve transit service to the central city residential communities most in need of it. Further establishing its commuter focus and exacerbating service shortages in the city, all three plans centered on express busways that ran entirely on highways and provided no local service. The transit elements in one proposal serviced only employment centers and Park and Ride lots.<sup>133</sup> METRO's suburban orientation emerged even in its rhetoric. The agency no longer aimed to provide basic mobility to all Houstonians; rather, it hoped to give commuters "an attractive alternative to the automobile," a goal clearly attainable only by convincing suburban drivers to convert their daily journey from car to transit.<sup>134</sup> It was not until Mayor Lee Brown, the city's first black mayor, successfully combined METRO, Houston, and federal funds to open the first leg of a proposed light rail system in 2004 that METRO

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<sup>133</sup> Jerry Laws, "Transit Plans Win Backing of Former Foe," *Houston Post*, October 11, 1984, H-Transportation VF, HMRC.

<sup>134</sup> METRO, "Houston Has a Traffic Problem...and METRO has Some Answers," 1984, H-MTA-1984 VF, HMRC.

reestablished a semblance of city-suburb balance to its system. This suburban reorientation intensified the immobility of Houston's poorest residents. As jobs, resources, and services moved out of many parts of the city, those without access to cars or public transportation found themselves stuck.<sup>135</sup>

METRO's approach to transportation after the 1983 transit debates reflected the city's transition—physically and cognitively—into a car-centric landscape.<sup>136</sup> On top of the HCTRA's and the Texas Highway Department's continued construction of highways, Houston's development continued to decentralize, and automobile transportation—either car or bus—became the sole means of movement for most residents.<sup>137</sup> Residents of the Hardy Corridor, like those before them in the Third and Fifth Wards, swallowed hard as the toll road came through their community. The new road not only reshaped the physical landscape, but also influenced the perceptions of the neighborhoods through which it passed. To most Houstonians the homes in the Hardy Corridor became simply the backdrop to the highway (Figure 6.8). As with other projects, the erasures brought by the road faded as new developments filled empty lots and the city moved on. Yet the legacies of the fight remained visible in the homes that hung on in the shadows of the toll road and in the minds of displaced residents and those who fought against its construction.

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<sup>135</sup> Robert Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson, eds., *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1997); Robert Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, eds., *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity* (Boston, Mass: South End Press, 2004); Karen Lucas, ed. *Running on Empty: Transport, Social Exclusion and Environmental Justice* (Bristol, UK: Policy, 2004); William Julius Williams, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009): 25-62; William Julius Williams, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996): 39-42, 223-224; Richard Hébert, *Highways to Nowhere: The Politics of City Transportation* (Indianapolis, Ind: Bobbs-Mill, 1972).

<sup>136</sup> Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2012). Wells discusses the creation of the nation's car-centric landscape. He argues that laws, development, and consumer action drove the nation to build a world that catered to, and even required, the use of cars.

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of the post-referendum road construction see Erik Slotboom, *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey*, (Cincinnati, OH: C.J. Krehbiel, 2003).



Figure 6.8: Aerial photograph of Hardy Corridor

This image demonstrates the physical impact the Hardy Toll Road would take on corridor neighborhoods. Howard, Needles, Tammen, and Bergendoff, "Preliminary Engineering Feasibility Study: Hardy Tollway," November 1981, Box 1, Folder 18, HSTRCC, RG F 18, HMRC.

These changes did not mean that a suburban vision of the politics of mobility went uncontested after 1983. While suburban Houstonians seemingly took control during the 1983 campaigns, the contentiousness of the debates illustrated the fraught nature of transportation decisions. The efforts of city residents and officials during the campaigns proved that these Houstonians would not simply cede the political arena. While central city voters could not outvote suburbanites, neither could suburbanites completely ignore the will of city residents. This dynamic became even more complicated as immigration into Houston from Central America, Asia, and the Middle East, and the diversification of the city's suburbs ensured that no single racial, economic, or political group would be able to dictate HMA policy without creating coalitions and compromises.

The 1983 transit debates represented just one of the many factors that influenced the city's continued growth from the 1980s to today. The outcomes of the contest ensured

that the city's transportation network and future mobility systems would be particular to Houston. Residents from across the metropolitan region—urban and suburban; politician and voter; transit backer or toll road advocate—shaped the terms of the debate and the choices the city made in 1983. Through those they fashioned the city itself. The contest between road and rail captured Houstonians' thought process in action and demonstrated the decidedly local flavor mobility decisions had taken on because of devolution and increasing citizen participation. Struggling to contend with a rapidly changing demography, economy, and metropolitan landscape, Houstonians argued, compromised, and voted their way into Houston's mobility future.

## Conclusion

When I am on the toll road, I get a strange feeling. Forgive my enthusiasm, but when I am on that road I am overwhelmed with confidence in this community, its citizens, its ambitions. I believe cities are built by people who decide to put down roots and actively plan for the future to make their part of the Earth a better place to live. That toll road tells me a lot of us consider Houston home.

Mark Anawaty, *Houston Chronicle*, August 7, 1988

When there's a benefit to be passed out, we [African Americans and ethnic Mexicans in the Fifth Ward] somehow or another don't get the respect. But when it comes to a burden being passed down, we somehow get more than our fair share.

Texas Representative Harold Dutton, *Houston Chronicle*, January 1, 1991

Discussing Houston's transportation structures in the late 1980s and early 1990s, two starkly different comments, one by the white *Houston Chronicle* journalist, Mark Anawaty, and the other from African American state representative, Harold Dutton, captured the complicated nature of Houstonians' relationship to their city's transportation network and their understanding of the history that shaped it. Reflecting upon his experience of driving on the newly completed Beltway 8, Anawaty celebrated Houstonians' embrace of toll roads earlier in the decade. In his estimation, citizens had made a smart choice in the 1983 transportation debates, one that signaled their commitment to the city and its growth. From the vantage point of 1988, though, Anawaty normalized Houstonians' participation in the vote. His telling smoothed over the immense contestations involved in the 1983 debate and took the broader history of Houstonians struggle to shape the politics of mobility, a past that told of the lengths to which Houstonians went to gain a voice in HMA decision-making, for granted.

Dutton's words could have just as easily been lifted from a newspaper in 1950 or 1970, as from their actual source in 1991. Indeed, for all the progress that had occurred

toward democratizing transportation decision-making and equally dispersing its benefits and consequences since 1950, much about the HMA's growth practices appeared, to Dutton and many others, to have not changed at all. The physical costs of Houston's growth continued to fall disproportionately onto working-class and non-white populations throughout the HMA. However, the fact that Dutton spoke in 1991, and not 1950, mattered a great deal, because the historical context surrounding transportation had shifted markedly. Most significantly, in the postwar period black Houstonians from Dutton's Fifth Ward had little formal recourse when highways bore through their neighborhoods. By 1991, however, when Fifth Ward African Americans faced infrastructure challenges they could expect support from elected officials at the local, state, and national level who, like Dutton, came from their neighborhoods and shared their concerns for its future.

Anawaty's and Dutton's comments illustrated the evolution of Houston's politics of mobility over the previous four decades. That Anawaty could frame Houstonians as decision-makers or that a representative like Dutton could deploy his political weight to express dismay about potential displacements, reflected the decades-long efforts of a diverse collection of Houstonians to first demand access to and then claim influence over HMA mobility debates and transportation planning. These passages, though, are detached from this contested history. As easy as it was for Anawaty to ignore the intense political battles of the toll road debate after the highway existed, it was equally as hard for Dutton and Fifth Warders to escape the legacies of problematic transportation decision-making when new projects focused in on their communities. However, neither perspective offered an accurate accounting of Houstonians' relationship to the politics of mobility because both ignored central aspects of the history that lay behind it.

The changing perspectives Houstonians held of mobility and the structures that allowed it between 1950 and 1985, resulted in Houston's particular physical form and politics. Unlike northeastern cities where dense downtowns and well-established suburban and urban public transit networks resulted in a transportation system built for multiple modes, Houston exemplified the auto-centric development of southwestern and southern cities. Its rapid population increase, the embrace of highways by elected officials and citizens, and the resulting proliferation of low-density urbanization were trends visible in cities across the Sunbelt after World War II. Houston's transportation decisions were unique from those in Los Angeles or even Dallas, however, because Houstonians' particular understandings and contestations of the politics of mobility gave rise to a Houston-specific development pattern. While it shared characteristics with other Sunbelt cities, Houston's choices in mass transit debates, the constituencies who participated in the struggles to define the city, and the influence the implemented systems had on the course of Houston's development were uniquely its own.

But, it is precisely that distinctiveness that makes Houston and its shifting politics of mobility an essential model to study in order to situate the role of similar forces in other Sunbelt cities. Houstonians' struggle to build and define the city's highways and mass transit system, overlapped with other contests concerning metropolitan politics, economic and racial equality, and the growth pressures of a developing metropolis. Engagement in transportation debates, then, afforded all Houstonians a platform from which they could assert their opinions and expectations about broader political topics. While permutations of socio-economic, demographic, political, and cultural details in other Sunbelt cities tweaked the makeup of these cities' iterations of contests around mobility and resulted in divergent choices for these cities' built environment, the parameters of Houston's transportation debates nonetheless offer a lens that frames such

contests, as well as their connections to other urban systems and processes, as an integral aspect of metropolitan Sunbelt development.

As this study has shown, the scope and significance of citizen participation in Houston's transportation debates changed drastically over time. While a collection of nearly all white and male elected officials, professional planners, and private developers held immense power over the decision-making process in the 1950s and 1960s, they never completely controlled it. The actions of citizens outside that group—from the protests of white middle- and upper-class suburbanites in Memorial Bend against the Outer Belt to the complaints of African Americans in the Fifth Ward about lack of pedestrian overpasses—at least forced leaders to acknowledge, if rarely embrace, the divergent perspectives citizens held of transportation and the politics of mobility. By the mid-1970s, aided by changes in federal oversight and citizen participation regulations, as well as by their own assertions of political power, an increasingly diverse set of Houstonians—male and female, African American, ethnic Mexican, and white, urban and suburban, rich and poor—possessed more influence over the city's choices. Simultaneously, residents' competing conceptions of mobility engendered new contests for power in the 1970s and 1980s. These fights included more citizens than ever and brokered unique metropolitan alliances, but they also highlighted Houstonians' new calculations about how best to defend their homes and promote their interests through transportation structures.

The shifting nature of Houston's development debates showed that the politics of mobility was never static, nor were fights about the structures that this politics considered ever settled. As the example of TMO and Harold Dutton's opening quote show, the access Houstonians secured to the decision-making process never resulted in an equal or consistent distribution of political power. Rather, influence in the city rose and declined



in connection with larger metropolitan and national forces. Further, individual's conceptions and expectations of mobility changed over time. White suburbanites living near the projected route of the Outer Belt might have applauded the construction of Interstate 10 in the 1960s because it gave them access to the central city, but by the 1980s those same residents might have derided the construction of the renamed Beltway 8 because it threatened their property values. Understanding the blurred nature of individual's relationship to the politics of mobility requires contextualizing their changing circumstances.

Two current transportation projects in Houston—the Grand Parkway and the METRO light rail—grew out of the city's earlier projects and the disputations surrounding each show how past decisions about infrastructure can remain influential for decades after systems are put into place. The historic roots of these projects lead to important questions about how they will function in the twenty-first century city and how Houstonians will use them as definitions and expectations for mobility change.

Sitting nearly 30 miles from the center of Houston and running for a total length of just over 180 miles, the Grand Parkway, Houston's third ring road, appeared on maps in the 1960s. It remained on metropolitan plans until the late 1970s, when officials removed it because ongoing transportation fights made such a long-term project seem untenable. After the creation of the Harris County Toll Road Authority, when suburb-oriented visions of mobility became ascendant in the choices of the HMA, the highway reappeared. Construction began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Since it has been an active project for more than 50 years, the parkway's drawn out planning and construction process reflect the historical contours of Houston's transportation decision-making process in ways other transportation structures cannot.

Part of the parkway's significance stems from the public-private partnership that governs the road's routing and fundraising. The Grand Parkway Association was commissioned by the state of Texas to head a public-private initiative that would allow landowners along the route, mostly real estate speculators and developers, to donate the land that the state would build the parkway upon. To pay for the construction the state would make the parkway a toll road. This funding structure was crucial given the huge demands placed on Texas' infrastructure budgets by a statewide population increase of more than four million people between 1980 and 2000. Facing huge demand, the Texas State Highway Department could barely keep up with maintenance needs on the state's more than 72,000 miles of highway, much less afford to build massive new roads. The parkway's public-private partnership model, while allowing developers an inordinate say over the route, also allowed construction to continue in spite of funding difficulties.

While the Grand Parkway Association made promises of improved suburban mobility, like the Outer Belt before it, citizens' concerns about the road's impact on their community led to contests around its construction. Suburbanites whose homes lay in the path of the road stood at odds with neighbors whose communities were unthreatened. Objecting to the routing near his suburban Governor's Place home west of Houston, Brant Malby levied a complaint that would not have been out of place in the 1960 Memorial Bend fight. Malby and his neighbors "bought their homes in Governor's Place" only "after checking into the [parkway's] alignment and RELYING ON TEXAS STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT MAPS" that showed it would not affect their homes. Only after they bought their homes did these Houstonians learn of the decision to build "a DIRTY HIGHWAY near a DEVELOPED AREA."<sup>1</sup> Like Memorial Bend residents

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Brant Malby to Grand Parkway Association, December 15, 1987, Box 999, Folder 8, JPL, HCA.

before them, Malby and his neighbors pushed for the road to be shifted further west, away from their homes. Like Memorial Bend residents before them, Malby and his neighbors failed to secure a reroute. While Houstonians had gained a greater voice in planning efforts, that voice did not guarantee desired outcomes. Elected officials still needed to provide mobility to the HMA's growing and suburbanizing population and they embraced the parkway to do so.

Today about half of the Grand Parkway is completed or slated to open by 2015. The remaining segments are to be constructed in the coming decades.<sup>2</sup> The route is both an artifact and a product of past transportation debates, a situation that gives the road a complicated position in the HMA today. With roots in the 1960s, the parkway's current form hews closer to the tenets of an earlier era of planning when the city and the mobility options it possessed were quite different than those of today. Like the majority of Houston's transportation structures, the parkway is based not on decisions made in 2014 to address 2014 problems, but rather shaped by choices made over the course of almost sixty years. The technologies and size of the HMA's transportation structures have changed over time, but they continue to prioritize outward growth even as the needs and shape of the HMA have changed due to population growth in the central city and new conversations about the place of mass transit throughout the metropolitan area.

The disputed creation of METRO's light rail system was tinged with overtones of both the HARTA and METRO debates. In the late 1990s, METRO announced the adoption of "Horizon 2020," a new long-range plan that made the Main Street corridor into a transit route.<sup>3</sup> Officials planned to use the corridor as the site for the seven-mile

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<sup>2</sup> For information on the status of the parkway see, <http://www.grandpky.com/home/default.asp>, last accessed March 5, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston and Harris County, "A History Lesson: Transportation and Transit in Houston, Texas," METRO public presentation.

“Red Line” light rail to be built in time for the city’s hosting of the 2004 Super Bowl. Mayor Lee Brown combined funds from the city and federal government in a way that allowed METRO to avoid a referendum on the line. Construction began in 2001 and the Red Line began operating in 2004. While the Red Line was under construction, METRO held a referendum to finance a larger system of light rail, the routes of which mirrored the proposed legs of the failed 1973 and 1983 rail proposals almost exactly.

The vote for the proposal in 2003 unearthed many of the arguments of the earlier debates, but the city of the early 2000s brought a new context to the conversation around mass transit. Twenty years of suburb-oriented highway development had made Houston synonymous with traffic jams by the first decade of the twenty-first century. Unlike other auto-centric Sunbelt cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, and Dallas, Houston could not point to any non-road transit systems as a sign that were working on addressing that congestion. What was more, the makeup of the central city was changing with more and more white-collar Houstonians returning to homes inside the inner loop to be closer to the resources of the city. This population joined with many African American, Asian American, and Latino Houstonians who remained within the loop to seek better transportation options. Significantly, by the 1990s, the Houston City Council reflected the demographic diversity of the city. In 2000, eight of the sixteen Council members, counting the mayor and controller, were African American, Latino American, or Asian American, including Lee Brown, the city’s first African American mayor.<sup>4</sup> The Council and METRO, encouraged by Houston’s growing and diversifying central city, chose to buck their suburb-oriented transit practices and embraced the push for light rail.

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<sup>4</sup> For a list of Houston mayors, controllers, and city council people see the city of Houston’s record, <http://www.houstontx.gov/citysec/mayors.pdf>, last accessed March 16, 2014.

Proponents of rail pitched the system as a solution to congestion issues, as a way to provide mobility to central city residents, and as a method to encourage the economic and residential development of the Main Street corridor. Learning from the two previous rail debates, supporters also couched the rail system within a package of road improvements to entice broader voter support.<sup>5</sup> Critics once again attacked METRO for spending too much money and argued that rail could never possibly serve the entire HMA. The vote for light rail passed in 2003. The first line quickly collected a high volume of riders, carrying 32,000 passengers a day between downtown, the medical center, and Reliant Stadium by the end of its first year of operation. Because the line was at-grade it did have problems with car-train collisions and critics continued to lambast its small service area and cost, but METRO declared its original foray a success nonetheless.<sup>6</sup>

Rail remains a controversial topic in the HMA because both working-class and wealthy suburban voters remain wary of supporting a system they do not believe will serve their needs. In November 2012, HMA voters drastically altered the rail system's future in a referendum that effectively prevented METRO from funding two planned extensions.<sup>7</sup> More than just about the extensions, the vote also reflected the continued contest over taxes in the HMA. After 1988, all METRO jurisdictions received a slice of the Authority's revenue to pay for general mobility projects. This money has become indispensable to the budgets of every city in the METRO service area, including Houston. The 2012 vote would have given control of those funds back to METRO, a result that

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<sup>5</sup> METRO, "Metro Solutions," 2003, H-MTA-Rail 2000s Vertical File (VF), Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC).

<sup>6</sup> Lucas Wall, "Rail Ridership Breezes Past Other Cities," *Houston Chronicle*, January 17, 2005, H-MTA-Rail 2000s VF, HMRC.

<sup>7</sup> David Crossley, "If You Want More, Better Transit, Vote No on Metro," *Houston Chronicle*, October 29, 2012; Bill King, "King: Metro Vote Means End Of Light Rail Project," *Houston Chronicle*, November 7, 2012;

local officials considered anathema to growth. This led them to campaign against the change. The outcome of the referendum maintained the revenue-sharing system and made the possibility of a full rail system less likely. Despite this blow METRO pushed on with three rail extensions approved before the vote. In December 2013, the first opened, adding another five miles of track to the original Red Line. In 2015, two more extensions will come online bringing the city's total mileage to just over twenty-two.<sup>8</sup> While divisions over the place and purpose of rail in the city remain, the new lines offer options that promise to reframe many residents' conceptions of mobility.

Houstonians face a significant challenge in trying to make existing transportation systems work for the changing demands of the twenty-first century city. Physical mobility, a concept redefined in the postwar period by its links to automobiles and highways, today encompasses more modes—walking, bicycling, and mass transit—and overlaps significantly with broad planning concepts and urban issues—transit-oriented development, affordability, sustainability, and immobility. Moreover, the very shape and pattern of urban growth is shifting and cities are becoming increasingly diverse. In recent years Houston's outward suburbanization has continued, but that movement has been balanced by the movement into the central city of a wealthier class of former suburbanites and recent arrivals.<sup>9</sup> As central cities gentrify, pushes to improve the livability of these areas dominate planning theory and practice.<sup>10</sup> Working to encourage centralization and quell the adverse ecological effects of expansive urbanization,

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Wilcox, "Houston Significantly Expands Light-Rail Line," *Civil Engineering*, February 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Kotkin, "Houston Rising—Why the Next Great American Cities Aren't What You Think," *The Daily Beast*, April 8, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/>, last accessed March 6, 2014. Steve Inskeep, "Fighting Gentrification With Money In Houston," National Public Radio, September 17, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112888084NPR>, last accessed March 6, 2014; Lori Rodriguez, "Gentrification Revives City But Displaces Minorities," *Houston Chronicle*, May 6, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> On recentralizing neighborhoods see, Steve Belmont, *Cities in Full: Recognizing and Realizing the Great Potential of Urban America* (Chicago: Planners Press, American Planning Association, 2002).

planning practitioners have attempted to construct neighborhoods that foster greater density and wean Americans off their overreliance on automobiles.<sup>11</sup> These approaches successfully demonstrate that cities can become more sustainable while still developing economically. The simultaneity of continued expansion and recentralization presents Houstonians, and urbanites across the United States, with a difficult set of questions about whether current transportation systems provide adequate and equal access to mobility for residents throughout metropolitan areas. This problem is particularly acute in southwestern cities where auto-centric development has created sprawling urban areas and even the best bus and rail systems struggle to meet the needs of transit-dependent riders.

For all their recent accomplishments, most smart growth and livability projects have not adequately addressed issues of social equity that arise during their implementation. Many fail to incorporate the perspectives of a wide population of urbanites, especially the opinions and needs of the poor and ethnic minority communities. Resources and consequences are still distributed unevenly, raising concerns about social and environmental justice.<sup>12</sup> Just as suburban areas received more city services in the 1960s, today's gentrifying, higher-income neighborhoods in Houston and other cities have more amenities than lower-income areas. This reality has contributed to a variety of

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Beatley, "Sustainability in Planning: The Arc and Trajectory of a Movement, and New Directions for the 21st Century City," in Bishwapriya Sanyal, Lawrence Vale, and Christina D. Rosan, eds., *Planning Ideas that Matter: Livability, Territoriality, Governance, and Reflective Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 91-124.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Campbell, "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities?: Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 62 (3) (Summer 1996): 269-313; Todd Litman and Marc Brenam, "A New Social Equity Agenda For Sustainable Transportation" paper presented at the 2012 Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting, published at <http://www.vtpi.org/equityagenda.pdf>, last accessed March 6, 2014.

negative health and lifestyle consequences for residents without access to public transportation, walkable spaces, or other resources.<sup>13</sup>

Current planning and governance practices have begun to tackle these equity issues. Particularly in cities with progressive planning regimes and tightly controlled land-use regulations such as Portland, discussions of mobility and access to it are increasingly connected to conversations about housing, infrastructure, and economic development.<sup>14</sup> Houston, and other southwestern cities with expansive corporate limits, are working to bring elements of this type of planning to their cities. In addition to the light rail, Houston is currently in the midst of operating a bike-share program and constructing a 150-mile long network of trails along its bayous meant to encourage walking and bike commuting. The project will cost \$215 million and open by 2020.<sup>15</sup> While problems facing immobile or carless populations—the poor, the transit dependent, the elderly, the disabled, and the young—persist, across the nation governments and planners, often at the insistence of citizens, are working to address these and other interconnected issues like air pollution and incompatible land uses. These actions are deepening definitions of mobility and incorporating previously underserved

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<sup>13</sup> Litman and Brenam, “A New Social Equity Agenda”; Michael Greenberg and John Renne, “Where Does Walkability Matter the Most? An Environmental Justice Interpretation of New Jersey Data,” *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 82 (1) 2005: 90-100; Kevin M. Leyden, “Social Capital and The Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods,” *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (2003): 1546–1551; Lawrence D. Frank, James F. Sallis, Terry L. Conway, James E. Chapman, Brian E. Saelens, and William Bachman, “Many Pathways from Land Use to Health: Associations between Neighborhood Walkability and Active Transportation, Body Mass Index, and Air Quality,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72 (1) (Winter 2006): 75-87.

<sup>14</sup> Center for Transit-Oriented Development, “Why TOD? Why Now?” Reconnecting America; Federal Transportation Administration, 2007, <http://ctod.org/ctod-research.php>, last accessed March 6, 2014; Center for Transit-Oriented Development, “Station Area Planning: How To Make Great Transit-Oriented Places,” Reconnecting America; Federal Transportation Administration, 2008, <http://ctod.org/ctod-research.php>, last accessed March 6, 2014; Eric Dumbaugh and Wenhao Li, “Designing for the Safety of Pedestrians, Cyclists, and Motorists in Urban Environments,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 77 (1) (2006): 69-88.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Clark, “The Lone Star Progressive: Annise Parker Sells Houston on Brass-tacks Urbanism,” *Forefront*, March 10, 2014, <http://nextcity.org/daily/entry/forefront-excerpt-the-lone-star-progressive>.



constituencies into the planning process. Officials and citizens must strive to make decisions that encourage participatory planning and that reflect urban residents' shifting expectations for mobility.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, they must acknowledge that such planning is not a panacea to injustice nor easily attained. Ongoing discrepancies in citizens' access to political power and social capital make the goal of democratic planning difficult to achieve, but one that should be pursued nonetheless.<sup>17</sup> In mobility decision-making, this task is all the more pressing due to the long-lasting legacies of infrastructure decisions on urban landscapes.<sup>18</sup> Just as the choices Houstonians made in 1950 continue to affect the city today, so will the choices made in 2014 ripple forward for decades.

As Chapter Four demonstrated, 1973 stands out as a hinge moment in Houstonians' struggle to imprint their understandings of the politics of mobility onto the city's development. Two decisions that year—an expansion of I-45 and the HARTA vote—marked the evolution of transportation decision-making from a relatively opaque, undemocratic process to one in which citizens from across the HMA could increasingly weigh in on decisions about the direction of the city.

In 1973, black residents of the Third Ward engaged in a failed protest against the expansion of I-45 within the neighborhood. Just before the decision to widen the road was made, state highway engineer Dewitt Greer came to Houston to dedicate the final section of I-10. Running north of downtown and paralleling the Pierce Elevated, the expanse represented the last element of Houston's contribution to the interstate system

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<sup>16</sup> This is happening in Houston through the efforts of official and non-profit agencies that are soliciting the opinions of Houstonians. See for example, Blueprint Houston, <http://www.blueprinthouston.org/>, last accessed March 6, 2014; Houston Tomorrow, <http://www.houstontomorrow.org/>, last accessed March 6, 2014; On METRO's community engagement see, <http://www.ridemetro.org/Community/>, last accessed March 6, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Susan S. Fainstein, *The Just City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> On the long legacies of infrastructure, Alex Marshall, *How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl, and the Roads Not Taken* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

until a new segment was designated in the 2010s. To Greer, and other officials standing on the road surface to celebrate the opening, the completion of the highway system was more than “a dream come true” for Houston; it was “the realization of many dreams.”<sup>19</sup> Greer was only partially correct. The road did meet some Houstonians hopes for mobility. But, the fights that predated I-10’s dedication and those that came after proved that the “dreams” of which Greer spoke, the notions of mobility he saw represented in the freshly poured concrete, were not universal.

Today, Houston’s politics of mobility remains unsettled. Houstonians have inherited a sprawled, auto-centric city that emerged from the contests waged by earlier generations of residents over the course of sixty years. They have also received a system of participation and governance that affords citizens a greater opportunity to shape the city’s future decisions. The challenge for Houston, and other southern and western cities, is to confront the issues created by their historical urban form—continued suburbanization, auto-dependence, and a lack of walkability—while also addressing the mobility needs of residents spread across the HMA. New coalitions and divisions will surely emerge as residents reevaluate their expectations for transportation and find allies who share those conceptions. New systems will be proposed, debated, dismissed, and embraced as Houstonians jockey to define the future of the city. As they make choices in the coming years about where the city is going and how it should get there, they would be wise to look in their rearview mirror.

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<sup>19</sup> Speech delivered by DeWitt C. Greer on occasion of the Dedication of IH-10, May 17, 1972, Box 2002/101-16, Folder: Speeches 1972, THDHR, TSA.

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