

HOUSTON COALITION FOR COMPLETE STREETS

Toward Complete Streets for Houston

Vision: Streets are safe for all users at all times throughout Houston

As of May 1, 2012, 1,045 people have signed the Petition for Complete Streets for Houston, requesting the following:

We call upon all local elected officials in the Houston region to begin a transformation of how our infrastructure is built and maintained, so that all appropriate projects incorporate the principles of Complete Streets for all users.

All infrastructure projects should properly balance the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, the disabled, automobile drivers, freight operators, transit, and local businesses along the street.

The City of Houston should lead this charge by adopting a policy of using Complete Streets design in all projects under the ReBuild Houston initiative. Where appropriate, when the streets are dug up, they should be replaced with wide sidewalks, ADA compliant intersections, and safe and clear bike lanes, as well as adequate, safe travel lanes for automobiles, transit, and freight operators.

The adoption of Complete Streets across the City of Houston would mean long-term improvements to health, safety, and the city budget. Property values are higher in areas seen as walkable and city expenses per capita are higher in areas that are less dense and auto-based. A majority prioritizes access to nearby services and walkability at the expense of home size and “big yards,” according to the Kinder Houston Area Survey:

In recent years, respondents have been asked what they would prefer if they were free to choose any kind of housing in the Houston area. The proportion who said they would like to live in “a single family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go,” dropped from 59% in 2008 and 58% in 2010 to just 47% in this year’s survey. In 2008 and 2010, 36% and 39% said they would opt instead for a “smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.” In 2012, the percentage of Harris County residents who would choose a more urbanized lifestyle jumped to 51%.

Complete streets provide a safer environment for pedestrians, bicyclists, vehicles, and residents, while attracting residential and commercial real estate investment. With less pavement and storm water run-off, Complete Streets can reduce capital and maintenance costs. Complete streets increase connectivity, including the ped/bike network and the “Bayou Greenways” program. By promoting walking and cycling in urban neighborhoods and districts, Complete Streets can improve community health and obesity rates.

The Houston Coalition for Complete Streets now represents 33 independent organizations that all see the benefits to their mission of making the streets of the Houston region safer for all users.

Were the City of Houston to adopt a comprehensive Complete Streets ordinance at this point, it could be the largest city in the nation to fully embrace the safety of all users of the street. However, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, and El Paso have all made moves in the direction of Complete Streets. Houston could adopt a series of overarching principles to be applied to all decisions impacting the safety of the streets. The core principle is to flip the priorities for how we design and rebuild our streets in the City of Houston. Prioritizing safety before speed and access before mobility is vital for ensuring quality neighborhoods, diverse opportunities for economic development, and healthier lifestyle options.

We believe that the Public Works and Engineering Department should plan and build our streets using the following priorities in this order: maximize safety, maximize access and options, maximize throughput, maximize speed where appropriate.

For example, in planning a neighborhood street, providing access for freight and moving trucks should be included in the priorities, but should not overshadow the safety of the residents of that street or their access to safe walking, biking, or transit as reasonable options for many of their daily trips.

The City of Houston has several unique complementary opportunities with which to coordinate a move toward Complete Streets. The Houston Health Department's Community Transformation Initiative sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control can and should include a substantial emphasis on improving health and reducing obesity by transforming local transportation policy and the built environment.

We believe that the Public Works and Engineering Department should plan and build our streets using the following priorities:

- 1. maximize safety**
- 2. maximize access and options**
- 3. maximize throughput**
- 4. maximize speed where appropriate**

Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services is currently forming the committees for their recently launched Obesity Collaborative that will seek to improve health through "upstream" solutions such as encouraging more active lifestyles by improving the built environment. They have already begun auditing the walkability and state of sidewalks for the entire county. This commendable effort could work hand in hand with the Community Transformation Initiative to pursue Complete Streets.

The City of Houston TIGER IV grant application is a positive step toward connecting the Bayou Greenways and the regional bicycle and pedestrian transportation network. A Complete Streets approach would find the most efficient ways to provide safe access from nearby neighborhoods to connect to this system.

An efficient strategy to rapidly provide safe bicycle access across a wide area is the City of Portland Neighborhood Greenways program in which a citywide grid of low-traffic neighborhood streets has been identified as a safe network for bikes. They are in the process of installing rainwater retention bio-swales that also serve as traffic calming bulb-outs coordinated with sharrows and other inexpensive treatments that encourage walking and biking while encouraging drivers to choose nearby routes. Portland plans to connect this network to 80% of households within the next 3 years for a total cost of \$50 million; the cost of one mile of urban freeway expansion. Such a system could be completed in a similar amount of time in areas of Houston where the original urban grid remains intact. Much of the design work could be done by the neighborhoods.

Department of Neighborhoods should develop a program that facilitates neighborhood groups working with the Public Works and Engineering Department and the Planning and Development Department to identify and prioritize ideal safe routes for walking and biking. Improvements should be funded by a city match of neighborhood contributions as well as existing funding mechanisms like the City's CIP and regional discretionary funds such as CMAQ and STP-MM.

The City of Houston should also pursue an agenda of Complete Streets at the regional planning scale to ensure the interests of its residents and businesses are met. The City is a partner in the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development and should ensure that future scenarios that maximize the benefits of walkable urban neighborhoods with Complete Streets are meaningfully considered. The long-term sustainability of the region will depend partially on the City of Houston's ability to provide a massive shift in the availability of truly affordable, lower carbon housing and transportation options. Complete Streets are key to such a transformation.

The lack of balanced concern for the safety of all users at the regional level is particularly damaging to the City of Houston, which is home to the greatest opportunity for complete neighborhoods connected with complete streets for the region. The City of Houston should advocate more for the interests of the residents of the City in future processes, such as the upcoming 2040 Regional Transportation Plan, by fighting for more comprehensive transportation strategies that includes Complete Streets. Also, some federal funding sources, especially the CMAQ and STP-MM funds can and should prioritize Complete Streets projects.

The Greater East End Management District seeks to deploy Complete Streets as a result of community visioning exercises and their Livable Centers study, but they have found that City of Houston code does not allow the safe neighborhood they seek. They collected signatures on the following petition:

Through a series of public workshops, stakeholder meetings, and extensive outreach, East End residents, property owners, and business owners have defined a vision for the future of Navigation Boulevard west of York Street:

- Create an active lively pedestrian promenade that forms the heart of a revitalized East End neighborhood.
- Make esplanade improvements to promote pedestrian street markets, outdoor dining, and recreational activities.
- Reduce the traffic lanes, build a wider esplanade and add on-street parking.

We have the vision. We have the public support. We have (some) of the money.

We need approval and support from the City of Houston and others to make this happen.

The undersigned affirm their support for the New Navigation Boulevard and urge the City, County, Metro, and others to unite behind this community vision.

We believe that the City should pursue the full plan for the new Navigation Boulevard as a pilot Complete Streets project, allowing for adjustment of all codes to achieve the optimal street for all users. This will provide the City with valuable on-the-ground experience with Complete Streets.

This also fits into what we believe should be some of the priorities for deploying Complete Streets. While we believe all streets in the City of Houston should be built with the safety of all users in mind, it would be prudent to prioritize areas for early adoption and retrofit that are within the Urban Corridors zone where Metro is building light rail transit. Also, the City should use this transformation toward Complete Streets to implement Mayor Parker's campaign priority of empowering neighborhoods for self-improvement. The City should prioritize variances in code and funding for neighborhoods that have well articulated and broadly held visions for Complete Streets and revitalized neighborhoods.

The City could develop a set of incentives to match neighborhoods initiatives to complete their own streets. The City could set aside a portion of CIP funds available to match funds that civic associations - or perhaps simply all the neighbors on a block - agree to spend to repair old sidewalks and install better sidewalks where they are too small or missing entirely. Other efficient elements of Complete Streets, such as traffic calming signs, bulb outs, street trees, and others could be similarly driven by neighborhood efforts supported by the City.

The approach to allowing more livable areas to develop free from the currently restrictive development and streets policies of the city should be applied to all Major Activity Centers. Downtown has been the only free market in the City and business and occupants benefit from the wide sidewalks and reduced automobile design speed. These benefits should be pursued at all of Houston's major job centers.

Current policies allow various obstructions in sidewalks like utility poles, as well as widespread deterioration of sidewalks that impair the access and opportunities of the mobility impaired, the elderly, and children. These

should change. For a great first person account of the experience of Houstonians who transport themselves via wheelchairs, listen to Kelly Moore and Addie Tsai on Hear Our Houston taking a walk in Montrose: (<http://hearourhouston.com/tour/a-walk-with-wheels-kelly-moore-and-addie-tsai/>).

We believe the City of Houston could pursue the following policies immediately on a Complete Streets path:

- 1) Adopt a more comprehensive street classification system as explained in the proposal from former Council Member Peter Brown, allowing for a greater diversity of street types and freedom of use.
- 2) Allow the New Navigation Boulevard to be developed as the pilot Complete Street.
- 3) The ReBuild Houston Initiative should ingrain the principles of Complete Streets immediately to ensure that the next streets to be dug up are rebuilt in a manner safe for all users.
- 4) Instruct Public Works and Engineering Department to rewrite the Design Manual for Complete Streets and to present a new one in June integrating the principles & policies of Complete Streets.
- 5) Host public hearings and comment periods on the proposed Design Manual to ensure broad and meaningful public participation in the process.
- 6) Allow smaller lanes and encourage them where appropriate.
- 7) Assess and reset timing of lights and walk signals to encourage walking and short trips.
- 8) Ensure that storm water discharges from streets and neighborhoods into streams and bayous will meet clean water quality standards.
- 9) Launch a Safe Routes to School task force in coordination with HISD. Refer to this CDC publication: Reversing declines in walking and bicycling to school (<http://tinyurl.com/7yjtha7>)
- 10) Pass a Safe Passing Law as has been done in other cities in Texas as well as the Texas House and Senate, yet vetoed by the Governor. Such laws provide police tools to sort out cases involving vulnerable users, such as public servants on the side of the road, bicyclists, and pedestrians.
- 11) Partner with H-GAC and Harris County PHES on a pedestrian / bicyclist audit to better understand use and level of service for pedestrians and bicyclists. (Refer to NCHRP Report 616: Multimodal Level of Service Analysis for Urban Streets - http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_rpt_616.pdf).
- 12) Allow downtown style regulation in all MACs to provide a more efficient parking market, wider sidewalks, and other livable amenities, such as removing setback requirements. Each MAC could benefit from a Complete Streets plan to maximize access for all users, including expected future residents.
- 13) Aggressively pursue funding and partnerships to complete the Bayou Greenways Initiative by 2020.
- 14) Instruct the Department of Neighborhoods to develop ways to expediently and efficiently build a city-wide slow streets network connecting neighborhoods to the Bayou Greenways Initiative, parks and public facilities like stadiums, major activity centers, transit centers, and light rail stations.
- 15) Allocate CIP funds to sidewalk neighborhood match and to build Complete Streets in Urban Corridors.