

**H-GAC** Houston-Galveston Area Council



PLANNING &  
DEVELOPMENT  
DEPARTMENT

**DESIGNWORKSHOP**

# URBAN HOUSTON FRAMEWORK

Houston, Texas

A CASE STUDY FOR THE H-GAC REGIONAL PLAN  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*May 2013*





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# URBAN HOUSTON FRAMEWORK

A Case Study for the H-GAC Regional Plan for Sustainable Development

*May 2013*

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# Executive Summary

## Project Background

Throughout the nation, Texas and Houston-Galveston area, policy makers, planning organizations, community residents, real estate developers, transit proponents and housing interests are striving to prioritize and implement projects, policies, and programs that will lead to more vibrant, healthy and accessible communities.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) – in conjunction with the City of Houston, Harris County and 22 other regional partners – applied for and received a 3.75 million dollar regional planning grant administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Sustainable Communities Initiative, and funded in partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). To learn more about the greater Houston-Galveston Regional Plan for Sustainable Development as it relates to the 13-County Texas Gulf Coast Planning Region, please visit: <http://www.ourregion.org/>.

A portion of these funds are being used to test six case studies throughout the region, one of which is highlighted by this Urban Houston Framework.

As the fourth largest city in the US, and with an array of new residents moving to Houston every day, the development of a Framework which promotes a more sustainable and targeted approach to Houston’s current development practices is vital to the greater success of the region as a whole. As such, the purpose of this Study is to develop a comprehensive Toolbox of policy and regulatory incentives that Houston can use to strategically encourage dense, sustainable Urban Centers in appropriate locations, while maintaining the character of existing neighborhoods.

The intent of the Urban Houston Framework is to help integrate land use and transportation planning by coordinating land development standards with new transit investments, and by providing affordable housing in dense areas around new transit lines.

The importance of creating a Framework now is that, despite strong growth, there are no comprehensive policies to encourage sustainable forms of development in Houston. Today, Houston is a polycentric city facing many challenges in promoting walkable, bikeable areas with a balance of housing and jobs.

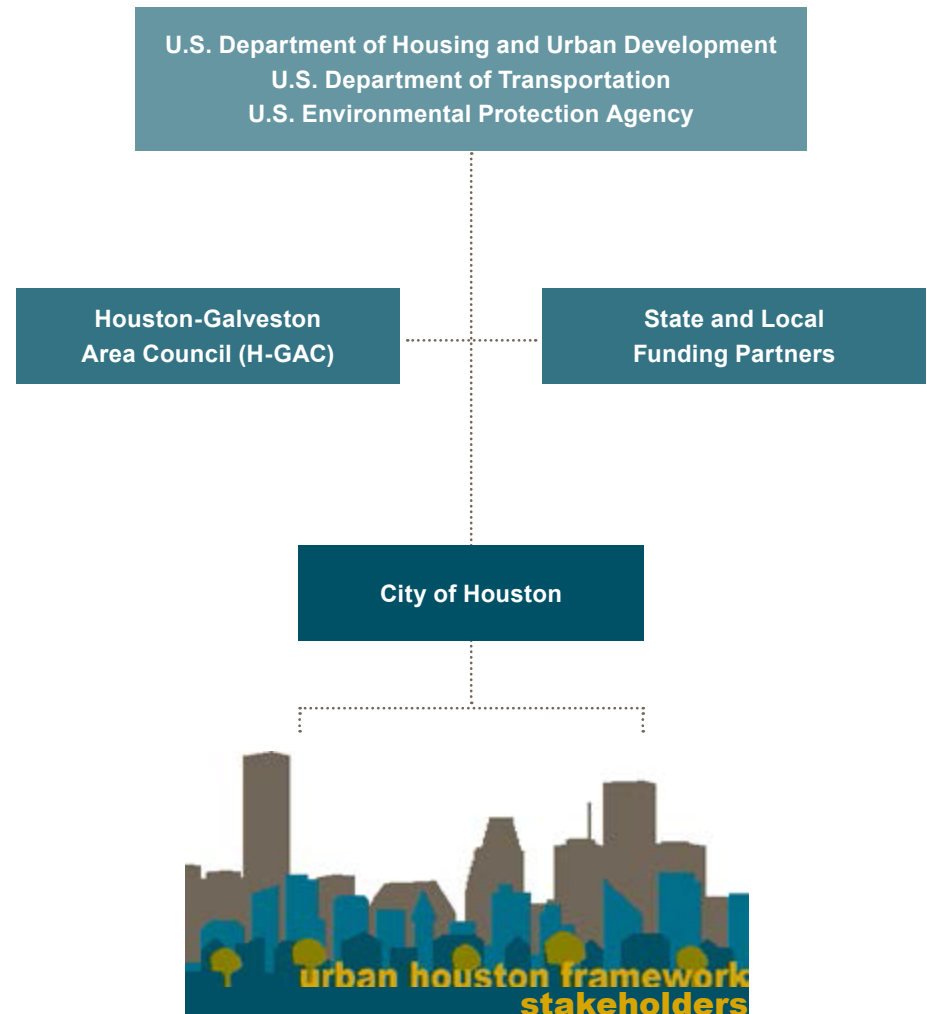


Figure 1: Urban Houston Framework Partners

# Executive Summary

In response to the unique diversity within Houston’s existing context, the Study works to evaluate what constitutes an Urban Center – or an area of live/work/play – where all individuals congregate providing for maximum use of existing city and regional resources including, but not limited to, enhanced pedestrian and transportation related infrastructure/ services, coordinated utilities, drainage as well as other benefits detailed in this Study.

However, recognizing that “one size does not fit all” this Study works to identify the proper characteristics that comprise such Centers, as well as evaluate the tools required to help ensure such development practices. **Table 1: Key Findings** summarizes conclusions identified by stakeholders throughout the Urban Houston Framework.

The findings of the Urban Houston Framework are intended not only to increase housing, economic and transportation opportunities at the local level, but also demonstrate various ways in which sustainability Tools can be applied to address planning issues within a variety of geographic contexts. Additionally, the initiative aims for the implementation of strategic projects, policies and programs that move above and beyond the ongoing, higher-level efforts of the Houston-Galveston Regional Plan for Sustainable Development.

**Table 1: Key Findings**

VISION	CATEGORIES OF CENTERS	GOAL	CHARACTERISTIC	MEASURABLE CHARACTERISTICS
Urban Centers are vibrant places in which people from all walks of life can live, work and play	Large Centers Medium Centers Small Centers	Address local and regional housing needs	Housing Character, Diversity	Residential Density (Dwelling Units)
				Housing Type
				Housing Affordability
				Housing Choice and Mobility (Fair Housing Factor)
				Housing Starts (New Construction)
				Mixed-Land Use (Housing and Localized Services)
		Contribute to high- quality infrastructure	Infill/ Redevelopment Potential	Vacant Land (%)
				Improvement to Land Value Ratio
				Significant Potential for Development/Redevelopment
		Encourage economic viability and diversity	Funding Mechanism, Management Entity	Management District
				Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ)
			Land Use Diversity	Land Use Diversity Index
				Average Residential/Commercial/Office FAR
				Impervious/Pervious Cover Ratio
				Area of Center in Acres
		Enhance community stability, accessibility and equity	High Employment, Population Density	Job Density
				Population Density
			Access to Amenities, Attractions, Destinations	Amenity Density
				Amenity Diversity
		Promote sustainable, healthy design	Bike/Pedestrian Accessibility	National/Regional (vs. Local) Attractions/Destinations
Bikeway Density				
Trail Density				
Support multimodal transportation and increased connectivity.	Access to Streets, Freeways	Sidewalk Accessibility		
		Intersection Density		
		Street Density (Freeways, Thoroughfares, Streets)		
	High Quality Transit	Access to Freeways		
		Access to Thoroughfares		
		Type of Transit		
		Type of Transit Facilities		
		Transit Frequency and Connectivity		

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## Framework Synopsis

This Study captures the outcomes of the Urban Houston Framework Focus Group and interested public dialogues led by Design Workshop from October 2012 to April 2013 in which various issues and solutions involving urban sprawl, low density, lack of pedestrian safety, and inequitable access to housing, economic and transit opportunities were discussed.

The Framework is intended to assist stakeholders interested in creating vibrant live/work/play environments. Stakeholder expertise consisted of realtors, developers, policymakers, engineers, architects, landscape architects, urban planners, housing interests and special districts.

These groups were identified early in the process as the key stakeholders and were engaged in each step of the process. Phone calls, e-mail invitations and advertisements on various social media websites (such as Twitter and Facebook) were posted prior to events to encourage participation from these audiences. City departments and policy making agencies participated, creating a strong platform for on-going dialogue regarding Urban Centers.

This Urban Houston Framework Study is the first of many phases in developing a comprehensive set of regulatory incentives that the City of Houston, as well as its regional partners, can use to selectively encourage dense, sustainable neighborhoods in appropriate locations, while protecting the character of existing, stable residential communities.



Photo Credit: Design Workshop | Denver, Colorado

*The Framework is intended to assist stakeholders interested in creating vibrant live/work/play environments.*

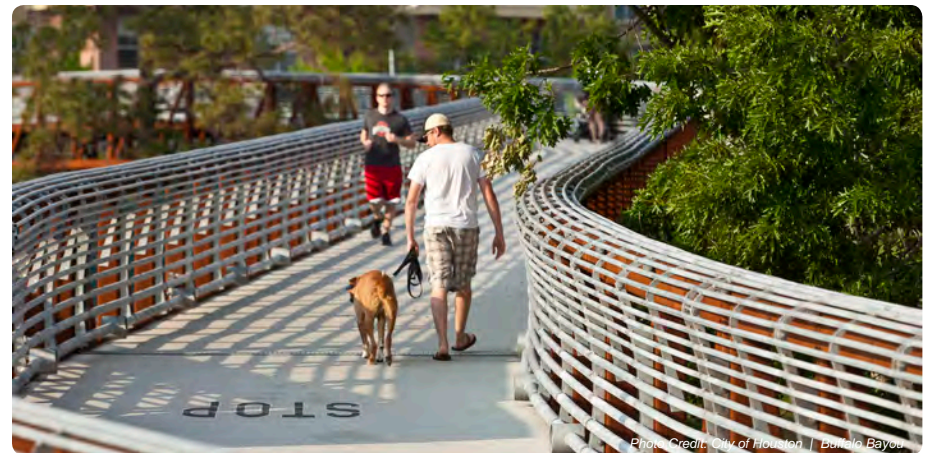


Photo Credit: City of Houston | Bayou Bayou

*This Urban Houston Framework Study is the first of many phases in developing a comprehensive set of regulatory incentives*



# Executive Summary

## Envisioning Urban Centers

Stakeholders developed a single, overarching Vision for all Urban Centers: To create vibrant Urban Centers in Houston where people from all walks of life can live/work/play. These Urban Centers will be in varying sizes and provide:

- Better connections between destinations in the city;
- Better coordination of land development standards with transportation investments and related regulations;
- Real housing choice for everyone;
- The elimination of food deserts where they currently exist;
- More walkable and bikeable areas with a balance of housing and jobs, and transportation choices.

In providing these elements, Urban Centers will decrease household transportation costs and the air pollution and traffic congestion associated with a very high percentage of single-passenger vehicle trips per day. This will lead to improved air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. It will also promote public health, which results in an enhanced quality of life for all Houstonians.

**Large Centers** have the highest housing and job densities accompanied with intense cultural and recreational amenities. People arrive via train, bus, bike, car or taxi and are able to walk to regional, national and international attractions. Tall, mixed-use buildings inhabit an interconnected street grid that encourages pedestrian-oriented retail and public transit usage.

**Medium Centers** have more housing, transit, jobs, amenities and activities than other areas and Small Centers. People arrive via bus, bike, car or taxi and walk various distances to citywide destinations. Mid- to high-rise buildings and transit enhances community stability by providing access to goods, services, schools and public spaces.

**Small Centers** cater to community needs and have low- to mid-rise buildings and a street grid that attracts small businesses. Although there is a mix of uses, they do not typically have high housing and job densities. Instead, they provide amenities, services and opportunities fitting for the neighborhoods they support and contribute to economic vitality by attracting entrepreneurship. Minimal transit exists in the form of local routes connecting to destination routes.



Photo Credit: City of Houston | Houston International Festival

**Large Centers** have tall, mixed-use buildings and an interconnected street grid that accommodates the highest densities of housing, jobs and amenities.



Photo Credit: City of Houston | Sugar Land Town Center

**Medium Centers** have mid- to high-rise buildings and transit that enhances access to goods, services, schools and public spaces.



Photo Credit: Design Workshop | Rice Village

**Small Centers** have low- to mid-rise buildings and a street grid that attracts businesses and services. People spend a majority of their time in Small Centers that cater to every-day, community needs.

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Because what gets measured gets done, both the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development and Urban Houston Framework Study identify Goals and develop benchmarks for measuring long- and short-term sustainability. The establishment of six Goals for achieving the Vision ensures all Centers epitomize best practices that lead to walkable, bikeable areas with a balance of jobs, housing and transportation.

Stakeholders were adamant that “one size does not fit all” in categorizing and designating Houston’s Urban Centers. They differ by size, audience (who is drawn to them), mix of land uses, density, accessibility, and community character. Through the Urban Houston Framework process, the following Center descriptions were molded in an attempt to capture these subtle differences.

## Designating Urban Centers

Stakeholder dialogue revealed a process by which Urban Centers could be designated and through which interested parties could voluntarily opt-in to the Framework. Three, alternative processes were discussed: a City Initiated Process, a Voluntary Area Initiated Process, and an Applicant Initiated Process.

A hybrid of the City and Voluntary Area Initiated Processes was preferred. City departments and other partners will identify areas meeting a series of Urban Center Criteria, such as job density, residential density, population density, number of transit facilities, etc. Areas meeting the Criteria would be assigned boundaries avoiding stable neighborhoods, yet capturing key redevelopment parcels in the area. A publicly accessible database would be available that interested applicants use to determine whether or not a land parcel is located within an Urban Center, and therefore eligible to have access to incentives included in the Toolbox.

Interested applicants provide the City with development plans that incorporate incentives outlined in the Toolbox crafted by stakeholders. The applicant then contributes to the implementation of more sustainable live/work/play environments near transit by building in accordance with Goals for Urban Centers.

## Incentivizing Better Development

The first phase of the Urban Houston Framework Study tests and evaluates, in the most transparent manner possible, incentives that could work alongside existing and future regulations to promote scalable, transferable and sustainable infill development/redevelopment practices. These Tools range from Universal Improvement Tools to Developer Incentives.

Universal Improvement Tools are those that help to improve services within Urban Centers that benefit the area as a whole. These Tools require both municipal and other organizations to work together to improve services over time, such as transit quality and the encouragement of sustainable development practices.

Developer Incentives are available to encourage developers who meet Criteria within designated Urban Centers, to develop in a character that is more in keeping with the goals of Urban Houston Framework Study.



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## Monitoring the Framework

Some performance measures will continue to increase regardless of Center size, location or function. These Characteristics are noted with “↑” in **Table 2: Future Performance Measures**. Examples of Characteristics that should increase into the foreseeable future are housing affordability, diversity and population/employment density, which should become more dense as Urban Centers continue to attract in-migrating populations from around the region.

The performance of a select group of Characteristics should decrease in the future. These are noted with “↓”. For example, as Centers become more established, the percentage of Vacant Land would decrease.

Other metrics may increase or decrease, depending on context. Characteristics of this nature are noted with “↕”. An example of a Characteristic for which optimum performance could be indicated by increasing or decreasing numbers is Housing Starts (New Construction). Some Centers may require retail or commercial construction in lieu of residential to meet demands of a growing population.

Finally, “⊖” is used for those Criteria performance targets are not applicable or measurable. Criteria of this nature, such as the Funding Mechanism/Management Entity Criteria, simply require a target of yes or no (i.e. yes - a Center has a Management District or TIRZ or no - it does not have a Management District or TIRZ).

As with any new policy effort, there should be a review time frame established for each Urban Center to assess whether or not Universal Improvement Tools and Developer Incentives are the appropriate mechanisms for achieving performance targets and Goals identified by stakeholders. The time frame of review for each Urban Center may vary, but should generally occur every 2-3 years following designation. Similarly, Urban Center designation procedures need to be monitored semi-annually to ensure the overall Implementation Framework for Urban Centers remains accountable to stakeholders’ Vision.

**Table 2: Future Performance Measures**

GOAL	MEASURABLE CHARACTERISTICS	FUTURE PERFORMANCE TARGET
<b>Address local and regional housing needs</b>	Residential Density (Dwelling Units)	↑
	Housing Type	↕
	Housing Affordability	↑
	Housing Choice and Mobility (Fair Housing Factor)	↑
	Housing Starts (New Construction)	↕
	Mixed-Land Use (Housing and Localized Services)	↑
<b>Contribute to high-quality infrastructure</b>	Vacant Land (%)	↓
	Improvement to Land Value Ratio	↓
	Significant Potential for Development/Redevelopment	↑
<b>Encourage economic viability and diversity</b>	Management District	⊖
	Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ)	⊖
	Land Use Diversity Index	↑
	Average Residential/Commercial/Office FAR	↑
	Impervious/Pervious Cover Ratio	↓
	Area of Center in Acres	↕
	Parks and Open Space	↑
<b>Enhance community stability, accessibility and equity</b>	Job Density	↑
	Population Density	↑
	Amenity Density	↑
	Amenity Diversity	↑
	National/Regional (vs Local) Attractions/Destinations	↑
<b>Promote sustainable, healthy design</b>	Bikeway Density	↑
	Trail Density	↑
	Sidewalk Accessibility	↑
<b>Support multimodal transportation and increased connectivity.</b>	Intersection Density	↑
	Street Density (Freeways, Thoroughfares, Streets)	↑
	Access to Freeways	↕
	Access to Thoroughfares	↑
	Type of Transit	↕
	Type of Transit Facilities	↑
	Transit Frequency and Connectivity	↑

↑ Increasing measurement indicates optimum performance  
 ↓ Decreasing measurement indicates optimum performance  
 ↕ Increasing or decreasing measurement may indicate optimum performance  
 ⊖ Performance target not applicable

# Executive Summary

## Organization of Study

**Purpose** highlights the key findings of stakeholder engagement exercises involving approximately 13,818 participants from a variety of backgrounds and interests. In the **Existing Conditions Assessment** chapter, various challenges and opportunities to more dense, efficient building practices are explored. A Peer Review of how other regions in the nation are approaching similar regional planning issues using Urban Centers highlights best practices and insights from other parts of Texas and the country.

Characteristics of regionally sustainable live/work/play environments are discussed in the **Urban Center Pattern Book** chapter that creates a concise snapshot of how ideal Urban Centers are physically designed.

Multiple ways in which H-GAC and City of Houston could move towards the creation of vibrant, dense Urban Centers are explored in the **Urban Center Recommendations** chapter. This chapter discusses the Process and Criteria used to define an Urban Center. It also defines Universal Improvement Tools that will generally elevate the quality of Urban Centers as well as direct Developer Incentives that could be used in Urban Centers.

Although findings for Urban Houston Framework Study recommendations were largely driven by public and stakeholder input, this Study is also grounded in the realities of technical, market and political feasibility considerations. The final chapter of this Study, **Urban Center Implementation**, provides a schedule for achieving policy, project, and program aims as well as identifies important roles, responsibilities, costs and ongoing monitoring techniques for gauging the performance of urban environments in Houston into the future.

## Towards the Future

Establishing accurate, reliable thresholds for measuring the performance of live/work/play environments will be important to the overall sustainability of the Urban Houston Framework. Similarly, monitoring thresholds for emergent Centers may differ from those of established Centers and from those of Centers transitioning from one size to the next.

While more research is required to assess exact targets for ongoing performance of Urban Centers (and the Characteristics thereof) today, it is crucial that the refinement of Criteria, Tools, Expectations and Processes ensue with the ultimate goals of monitoring implementation in mind.

Although additional phases of the Urban Houston Framework will need to focus on thresholds for measuring Urban Center Characteristics, the analysis and stakeholder dialogue included in this Study provided an understanding of general performance targets for Criteria in the future.

It is recognized that this Study will not lead immediately to implementation of improvements and new developer incentives for Urban Centers, but it does fulfill several Critical Success Factors defined early in the process such as:

1. Address local and regional housing needs;
2. Contribute to high-quality infrastructure;
3. Encourage economic viability and diversity;
4. Enhance community stability, accessibility and equity;
5. Promote sustainable, healthy design; and
6. Support multimodal transportation and increased connectivity.

Nevertheless, dialogue that has arisen from the Urban Houston Framework Study is essential to crafting a program that diverse stakeholders can rally around. The terminology, approach and outcomes resulting from this dialogue will form the foundation for continued collaboration among stakeholders, making the recommendations in this Study more realistic and supportable in the years to come.