Alternatives

The development of H-GAC's regional growth and reinvestment alternatives began in the spring of 2012, during Phase I of the Community Engagement Process. An array of public engagement tools, including large-format public meetings, community meetings, the MindMixer online forum, surveys, and community interviews were used to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the public's desires and aspirations for the future of the region.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

The community engagement team conducted a total of 22 large-format public meetings, including one meeting in each of the H-GAC region's 13 counties. Members of the engagement team consulted with local community organizers to determine a time and location that would be conducive to maximum attendance.

The purpose of the public meetings was to:

- Give an overview of the plan process and identify future outreach opportunities
- Introduce general definitions of sustainability with an emphasis on the diversity of the word and its relevance to the specific community
- Set the general growth/change context for the local community to reinforce why sustainability is important
- Introduce the plan's organizing framework of people, place and prosperity
- Discuss the plan's draft goals as identified by the Work Groups and use an interactive exercise to rank or prioritize the goals for use in the plan
- Introduce the concept of benchmarks or indicators as a way to measure success going forward
- Create an opportunity for participants to contribute their own ideas for:
    - A definition of sustainability
    - Refinement of draft goals
    - Potential obstacles to the implementation of draft goals
    - Other goals to consider

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

The community meetings were designed to be more intimate and small-scale than the large-format public meetings in order to encourage a meaningful and personal dialogue with members of the community who might not have felt as comfortable participating in a large-format meeting. Additionally, these community meetings were specifically targeted to fill gaps in the geographic and demographic coverage resulting from the large-format public meeting schedule. The community engagement team used quantitative, qualitative and geographic analysis to assess deficiencies in prior meeting coverage and inform the schedule of subsequent sessions.

SURVEYS

The H-GAC engagement team and Coordinating Committee created a survey that was circulated to the public both electronically and in print. The intent of the survey was to produce information

comparable to the general visioning and goal-setting exercises of large-format and community meeting exercises. The survey reinforces several basic themes of the plan, including its local and regional emphasis, the connection between sustainability and everyday quality of life and opportunity, and a forward-looking focus. The questionnaire generates the following specific data for plan development:

- Self-selected words to define the meaning of sustainability

- Ranked local community issues

- Ranked regional issues

- Ranked plan element goals

- A visioning statement for the community

Survey responses were recorded with basic geographic information, such as work and home zip codes, or city/county of residence, for mapping and assessment of feedback by individual communities. For analytical purposes, the survey also included questions on demographic data.

PROJECT WEBSITE AND MINDMIXER

The plan website, maintained by H-GAC, is continuously updated with information on the planning process, including background information on the Sustainable Communities Intiative, information on the H-GAC Coordinating Committee and Work Groups, a calendar of events, and various other planning related documents. The project website also includes a link to MindMixer forum, which asks participants to respond to the following questions:

- **What should the plan focus on** (respondents were given a choice of "seconding" five of the 12 draft goals presented at the public meetings)

- What are the major issues where you live?

- What are the major issues of this region?

- How would you define sustainability?

- What is your hope for your community?

STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

The purpose of these one-on-one interviews is to:

- Form partnerships with umbrella organizations representing the various cultural, demographic, geographic or issue-based perspectives of the region

- Leverage existing community and organizational networks to build interest and trust in the planning process among underserved groups and minority populations

- Recruit potential CAT members and identify long-term advocates for sustainability

- Explore themes and messaging in small, neutral settings

- Draw from specific professional perspectives in areas such as education, development, or the environment that may not otherwise be captured by general public meeting formats

Interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. What are your expectations of the plan?
2. How would you define if the plan is successful?
3. How do you envision you and/or your constituents or clients will utilize or benefit from the plan?
4. What do you see as the largest opportunities and challenges the region faces?
5. What issues (drawn from the plan elements of housing, transportation/infrastructure, healthy communities, social equity, environment, economy) are most important to you? Which do you think are most important to your constituents or clients?
6. What are your expectations of the outreach process?
7. What do you think is the best way to talk about sustainability and explain the importance of sustainability and of participating in the plan?
8. What are some suggestions for effectively reaching out to your constituents or clients?
9. What are some suggestions for appropriate venues for meetings or kiosk/mobile office sites (please list any specific locations/venues)?
10. Other comments or suggestions?

ALTERNATIVES DEVELOPMENT

From analysis of the various public engagement outputs, H-GAC planners derived the different growth and reinvestment alternatives for the future of the region. Of particular importance to the development of these alternatives were the responses to the survey question "What areas do you think the regional plan should focus most on?" The responses that received the highest scores were "Transportation choices, including walking, biking, transit and driving; education and training opportunities; coordinated investments in infrastructure, housing, and transportation; and clean and plentiful water, air, soil and food. Looking for three distinct alternatives, the team at H-GAC combined the "Transportation choices" response with the "Coordinated investments" response to form transportation and infrastructure focused alternative. The "Education and training opportunities" response and the "Clean and plentiful water, air, soil and food" response each received its own alternative.

The team at H-GAC developed a future alternative for each of the newly framed areas of concern: Greener Region, Less Time on the Road, and Competitive Workforce. A fourth alternative, called Current Course, was developed as a common baseline against which the other alternatives could be judged.

2040 Current Course

The Current Course alternative was meant to represent a future in which the status quo development trends were maintained.

- Existing trends continue
- No major policy changes
- Most of growth occurs outside of existing towns and cities

- Traffic congestion increases
- Large amount of natural areas list to development
- Education concerns not addressed, leading to a less competitive workforce

In this alternative, most of the growth occurs outside existing towns and cities. This helps keep housing prices down, but does not create long-term value for most homeowners, as older cities, suburbs and towns decline with the continuous movement of people to newer communities.

The distance between jobs, housing and activities also continues to increase, meaning that driving remains the option for almost all the trips people make. Despite major upgrades in roads and freeways, traffic congestion keeps increasing, as the number of new drivers grows faster than the funds available for road expansion and maintenance. Public transportation, walking and bicycling increase somewhat, but don't make a dent in the congestion problem.

Large amounts of green space and natural areas are converted to suburban-style development. Better designs and technologies help offset some of the environmental impacts, but these and other efforts to improve air and water quality are insufficient to keep up with the rate of population growth.

There is a substantial decline in the region's overall education level as population growth exceeds capabilities of the existing education system. The region's minority communities, now the majority of our population, are disproportionately affected. This makes the workforce less competitive for many high-demand jobs, and economic competitiveness suffers.

- Currently 92% of the population lives in existing communities
- In 2040 53% of the population lives in existing communities

2040 Alternative Future: Less Time on the Road

This alternative promotes more growth in existing communities where infrastructure and services already exist.

- Reduction in travel times, costs
- Most of growth occurs in existing places
- More jobs and housing located closer together
- Some new housing is smaller sized in walkable areas
- More investment in sidewalks, bikeways, public transportation
- Better air quality

In this alternative, most of growth takes place in cities and towns—particularly in activity centers and other areas where housing, jobs and activities are located closer together. New development strengthens the local tax base in these places, enabling them to improve maintenance and services without raising taxes.

Transportation strategies are less focused on widening freeways and major roads and more on public transportation—buses, light rail and commuter rail—and improvements to sidewalks and bikeways. Local plans, codes and incentives are revised to encourage new development in areas with existing street systems and services, and to promote more pedestrian-oriented design. Much of the new housing built is smaller than today's norm and, in the most walkable areas, is more expensive. This is a tradeoff many are willing to make to reduce their travel time and cost. There is still an ample amount of traditional single family suburban housing throughout the region, and residents in these areas benefit from reduced competition for space on major roadways.

- In our current course 53% of the population growth occurs in existing communities in 2040
- In this alternative 76% of the population growth occurs in existing communities in 2040

2040 Alternative Future: A Greener Region

In this alternative, the region has made a major effort to preserve its best natural areas—wetlands, forests, prairies and shorelines—and to reduce air and water pollution. Suburban growth trends continue, with the exception that development is greatly reduced in those areas most vulnerable to flooding and hurricane storm surge—which are also some of the region's best wildlife habitat. Public and private funds are used to preserve many prime natural areas and provide access to residents and visitors for outdoor recreation. These efforts increase the quality of life for residents and enhance the region's ability to recruit new business and skilled workers and to attract tourists.

Private sector initiatives to promote green building and low impact development are accelerated, and these practices become the norm, reducing energy consumption and runoff pollution. These efforts are coupled with local government initiatives to adopt greener practices and provide more services to residents that enable them to recycle, and reduce energy and water use and household pollution. While these programs entail up-front costs, many of them result in cost-savings over the long term.

2040 Alternative Future: Competitive Workforce

In this alternative, the region makes a major effort to increase the educational achievement of its residents. Improving high school graduation rates, particularly in low-income communities where dropout rates are high, becomes a priority. The focus is not only on improving schools, but also addressing community factors such as poverty, crime, and substandard housing that can negatively affect educational outcomes.

These efforts are coordinated with increased educational enrichment, including pre-school, after-school tutoring and mentoring, and English-language skills programs. Additionally, improved opportunities for vocational training, adult education, and counseling and support for small business owners are provided throughout the region.

These initiatives require a substantial taxpayer investment, but also receive major support from the private sector and non-profit organizations. Costs to the public are offset by major increases in the earning power of residents, strengthening of the local tax base, and the economic development benefits of having a highly-skilled work force.

Benefits to More Education

- $45.4 Billion in Earnings
- $34.9 Billion in Spending
- $79.3 Billion in GDP
- $1.6 Billion in taxes

Currently 80% attain high school or college. Under our current course in 2040 76% attain high school or college, while in this alternative 95% attain high school or college by 2040.

SURVEY OF ALTERNATIVES- THINK 2040 SURVEY

Maps and infographics were created to explain each alternative and presented to the public as part of the Think 2040 Survey. The survey ran throughout the fall of 2012, and was available to take online, or at interactive kiosks stationed throughout the region. H-GAC staff held targeted presentations and sent emails and newsletters with the survey to their extensive mailing list of approximately 14,300 people, and traveled to rural areas in an attempt to reach communities that had been underrepresented in previous planning efforts. To reach the region's large immigrant population, the survey was conducted in six languages: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Korean.

Survey respondents were not asked to choose between the alternative, as the outcomes of the different alternatives were not meant to be mutually exclusive. The alternatives were presented to enable respondents to visualize the implications of certain policy choices and planning-related initiatives, and to understand the potential tradeoffs involved in future development decisions. The survey questions were meant to ascertain respondents' opinions on the current state of the region, as well as their preferences for the future of the region. From the survey we learned the following about each alternative:

Less Time on the Road

- Not a burning issue today, but a future concern.
- Support for planning
- Support for balanced investments
- Demographic, geographic differences
- People concerned about density
- Influence of choice school districts overstated

Greener Region

- Conserving natural areas had highest support
- Strong support for conservation and environmental stewardship, least variation
- Support for public expenditures and regulations, skepticism about entirely voluntary approaches
- Rural attitudes differ significantly

Competitive Workforce

- Majority satisfied with training opportunities, but satisfaction lowest in rural areas
- More non-whites, lower income people interested in learning new skills
- Community factors perceived as detrimental to learning environment, particularly among non-whites

Feedback from the Think 2040 Survey was used by H-GAC staff to develop priority strategies, or specific action plans to be used in plan implementation. Survey responses helped to conceptualize respondents' vision for the future, and priority strategies were then developed as necessary steps toward the realization of that vision. An Alternatives Analysis workshop was held on December 10, 2012, in which H-GAC staff discussed the results of the Alternatives Analysis Survey with members of the working groups and the Coordinating Committee. Analysis of survey responses on a sub-regional scale gave insight into the type of strategies that would be appropriate for each specific transect (urban, suburban, coastal and rural), and helped move the planning process ahead into the development of priority strategies.