



HOUSTON: “CAN DO” URBAN AREA

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	5,200,000	Atlanta, Madrid, Toronto,
Urbanized Area* Population	3,825,000	Tianjin, Barcelona, Guangzhou, Sydney
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	1,295	Detroit, Miami, Dallas-Fort Worth, Nagoya
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	3,350	
Population per Square Mile	2,950	Portland, Dallas-Fort Worth, Calgary, Adelaide
Population per Square Kilometer	1,152	
*Continuously built up area		

Few, if any, urban areas have been as successful in controlling their traffic congestion as Houston. Houston is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in North America. By the early 1980s, the area had managed to develop the worst traffic congestion in the United States, even worse than Los Angeles. Businesses were beginning to tell local officials that they were no longer interested in locating in Houston, just as is occurring now in Portland due to the smart-growth generated traffic congestion in that urban area.

But, in this “can do” urban area, local officials did not huddle together with their sweaters in Carteresque pessimism and whine about “an era of limits” or “our best days are behind us” or even, as Anthony Downs would have us believe, that we had better start liking traffic congestion. Instead, they set about to solve the problem and in fact built enough new roadway capacity to make things better now than they were in the middle 1980s, and to fall to 14th in traffic congestion in the United States, behind Los Angeles, Portland and other urban areas.



It is important to note that Houston

did not make things better just by expanding the freeway system. Like Atlanta, Houston had an underdeveloped arterial street system --- actually the situation here was better than in Atlanta, but much worse than many other places. So the program included expansions and improvements to arterial street systems. Much of this occurred under the leadership of my friend, former Mayor Robert Lanier.

Even so, there are problems with the Houston freeway system. A number of interchanges suffer from the old 1950s design flaw that assumed less through-capacity would be needed, because traffic would be going off to the side toward the crossing freeway. Of course, the lane changing that occurs at interchanges creates a need for more, not less capacity. Now there are major programs underway to further expand Houston's freeways, but before the present construction some of the busiest freeways in the urban area narrowed to two or three lanes in each direction when they went through interchanges. But there are very wide freeways here. The reconstruction of Interstate 10, to the west, will reportedly include up to 22 lanes, which would make it the widest freeway in the world. The Harris County Toll Road Authority has built a beltway within the urban area, which if it were in Beijing would be Ring Road #3 (Ring Road #2 is Interstate 610, and Ring Road #1 is the downtown loop formed by Interstates 10 and 45 and US-59). Work has already been started on Ring Road #4, the Grand Parkway. But Ring #5 is largely completed and #6 is under construction in Beijing, so Houston has some catching up to do. Houston is not exceedingly blessed by cross-town freeways, but has managed to build Ring Roads #2 that double as cross town freeways, by virtue of their nearly square or box-like design. The Toll Road Authority has recently opened North America's second fully automated toll road, following in the footsteps of Canada's most automobile oriented urban area, Toronto. But drivers need to be careful here. While the Canadians send you a bill, based upon your license plate if you don't have the necessary transponder, these Americans send you a traffic ticket.

Many freeways have special lanes for buses and car pools in the center. Unfortunately, they are one-lane reversible facilities, which means that they improve mobility toward downtown in the morning and away from downtown in the evening. Despite the impressive towers that have been built downtown since the 1960s, downtown represents little more than five percent of jobs.



The urban area has recently opened a light rail line and has plans to extend it to serve small segments of the community within Ring Road #2. It is, of course, neither here nor there with respect to transportation. Its role is to consume money and to give the local "railigious" an altar at which to burn incense.

Houston is the urban area that defined edge cities. It had multiple centers before Atlanta gained perhaps the premier reputation for

these peripheral business centers. There is the Post-Oak Galleria business district, which contains what was built as the Transco Tower (64 stories, 900 feet), now called the Williams Tower. When opened in the 1984, this was the tallest building in the world outside a central business district. One web-site (www.architecture.about.com) still credits the building with the tallest-outside-downtown title, but in fact there is at least one taller, the Citic Tower in Guangzhou (80 stories and 1,050 feet), built in 1997. There may be others.

Post-Oak Galleria is larger than most downtown areas. But, since it is too far from downtown to take advantage of the radial transit system, there is little express service to the area. So the transit market share is well below what would be expected for a downtown area. There is also the Texas Medical Center, to the south of downtown and a number of smaller centers, such as Greenway. Out west on Interstate 10 is one of the most decentralized centers in the nation, the energy corridor. Even more decentralized commercial development will be found all over the urban area --- smaller business centers with high rise buildings.

That is not to suggest that Houston does not have an impressive central business district. It is the usual American-sized 100,000 to 150,000 job employment center, along with Baltimore, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Cleveland, etc., etc. Also, like these places, the height and prominence of the towers misleads considerably with respect to relative importance. In Houston, little more than five percent of employment is downtown. Thus, Houston's world class cost light rail system starts with a potential market of barely five percent, of which, of course, it will capture little.

But, like Los Angeles, Houston is somewhat unique in having a CBD with little history. Virtually all of the largest buildings are products of the 1960s or later. Indeed, downtown Houston has some of the best examples of post-modern office building construction that will be found in the United States. Nearly all were built by banks. The buildings are still there, but most of the banks have either failed or been taken over by others. But Houston and Texas never suffered the humiliation of San Francisco and California, which saw their world's largest bank (Bank of America) fall considerably down the rankings, and then be taken over by a Charlotte bank. The Bank of America name survives today only because the acquiring company thought that it was a better name than Nation's Bank. We agree.



Houston is the antithesis of Portland. There is no zoning here, but at the neighborhood level, things look little different from US urban areas that have zoning. There is no smart growth here, and the community is better off for it. The average house price in 2004 was under \$140,000, nearly one-third below slower growing Portland, and competitive with prices in two other urban areas

growing faster than Portland: Dallas-Fort Worth and Atlanta --- urban areas in which people's preferences determine where development occurs not the Soviet bread-line style land rationing that produces small, ugly housing in Portland.

This is, of course, good for people who live in the area. It is especially good for lower income households and minority households, which typically have lower incomes. In the Houston metropolitan area, for example, African-American home-ownership is 20 percent higher than in Portland. The gap is even greater in Hispanic home ownership, with Houston having a 42 percent higher rate based upon 2000 US Census data. Houston, unlike Portland, seems to favor people over what urban planners and architects view as good planning. Good for them.

Houston, like Los Angeles and Sao Paulo, is a city of hope. Here the aspiring have come from the Northeast and Middle-West of the United States rather than the Northeast of Brazil. They have also come from Mexico and other Latin American countries. It is here that William Lewis, founder of the McKinsey Global Institute, noted that comparatively uneducated workers from Latin America are as productive in house building as any construction workers in the world.

Houston has been one of the fastest growing urban areas in the United States since World War II. The metropolitan area (labor market area) has added more than 4,000,000 new residents and grown more than 500 percent. Houston, with Dallas-Fort Worth, Miami and Atlanta has led the nation strongly in population growth among the metropolitan areas with more than 5,000,000 population (Atlanta, the fastest growing major metropolitan area in the high-income world, reaches that level this year).

The Houston urbanized area is comparatively more dense than might be expected. At 2,950 persons per square mile, Houston is little more than 10 percent less dense than compact city "model" Portland and 20 percent less dense than Phoenix. Houston is approximately the same density as Dallas-Fort Worth, but is less than one-half as dense as Los Angeles or the average European urbanized area.

But there is room to grow here. And Houston is growing. Unlike so many other US urban areas, Houston is making the transportation investments that will make it more competitive in the future, despite the billions that will be wasted on light rail. If any US urbanized area deserves the appellation of "can do," it is Houston.







PICTURES

Downtown (Central Business District) from I-45
Approaching over Eastern Suburbs
Ex-Transco Tower
I-45, Busway-HOV Lane in Middle, CBD in Distance
Ex-Texas Commerce Tower (Left), Ex-Republic Bank (CBD)
Greenway Plaza from US-59
Approaching the Energy Corridor on I-10
Dinner (Chicken Brasil) at Café Red Onion (Lo Mejor)
West Houston Latin American Restaurant

By Wendell Cox

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