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Getting on track for growth

As Houston's population keeps rising, experts say city needs a strategy to stay competitive

By **CAROLYN FEIBEL**
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Houston needs a regional growth plan to compete globally with cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Dubai.

That was the warning — and challenge — issued by land-use experts Thursday at a panel convened by the Center for Houston's Future.

By 2015, 1 million additional people are expected to settle in the eight-county region. Three million more are expected by 2035. To cope, the region needs rail links to airports, more housing downtown, and a plan for its aging, ad-hoc sewage systems, the panelists said. Some better marketing would help, too.

"It's fine to have an engine in your logo, but it's the 21st century," said William Hudnut III, a panelist and the former mayor of Indianapolis. Hudnut was referring to the city's seal, which features a steam locomotive and a plow. He said Houston's regional brand should scream "opportunity."

The panelists were assembled by the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., that researches the best development practices around the world.

Houston's competitors globally are New York; Los Angeles; Chicago; London; Paris; Sydney, Australia; and United Arab Emirates' Abu Dhabi and Dubai, according to panelist Robert Grow, a land-use attorney lawyer for Salt Lake City.

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"Each of your competitors are re-branding and revisiting," Grow said. Those cities have also launched regional action plans to predict and manage growth, he said; Houston needs to step up to the plate, despite a cultural aversion to regulation and a love of political home rule.

Zoning, however, is probably not the answer, the panelists agreed.

"Zoning is not part of the culture here," Hudnut said. "It's like asking Indianapolis to become a great shipbuilding center. It's not going to happen."

The call for a growth plan comes as neighborhood groups push for regulation to restrict unfettered development that residents say causes traffic congestion and destroys historic properties and green space.

But Mayor Bill White's spokesman, Frank Michel, said the city must be doing something right considering it's added 250,000 jobs in the last four years and is an affordable place to live.

"Yes, we're going to have explosive growth," Michel said. "We need to plan for that, but we need to do it in a way that strikes a balance between letting the market work."

Houstonians have evolved other effective methods to guide land use, such as special improvement districts or tax-increment financing, said Scott Polikov, a principal with the Gateway Planning Group in Fort Worth. Polikov said different types of financing, such as title transfer fees, could be used to raise capital for rail projects.

"When you don't want government involved, it's called 'regulation,' " Polikov observed, drawing knowing chuckles from the audience at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. "When you do want government involved, but don't want to admit it, you call it 'public-private partnerships' or 'special districts.' "

Polikov said the Houston region can achieve the positive effects of zoning through better urban design and voluntary "livability" standards adopted by builders. He cited The Woodlands as a good example of both. Voluntary development standards are currently being developed by a task force headed by Roger Galatas, the former CEO of the Woodlands Operating Co.

To discourage sprawl and encourage a higher quality of life, the Houston-Galveston Area Council could reassess how it distributes federal transportation dollars, Polikov said.

One idea is for HGAC to put some of the money into a "competitive pot," Polikov said. Various transportation projects would then have to compete for the money. Funds would be awarded if the projects supported closer connections between home and workplaces, green building practices, affordability, habitat protection and neighborhood schools.

Houston's affordability was the biggest surprise for the experts, who spent three days here. Housing prices should continue to attract high-skilled workers, and Houston should preserve affordability.

"Don't risk what may be your key asset to attract young people to the region," Grow said.

Houston's strengths also included its entrepreneurial culture and a shared feeling that growth is good, rather than threatening. The city has a great port, a "critical mass of industry clusters" such as medicine and energy, an arts district, and a desire among many residents to move back to the inner city, Hudnut

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said.

"We really are impressed by Houston," he said. "We're convinced you are on your way to becoming America's fourth global city after New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. You're on your way; you're not there, yet."

After the panel, Hudnut said he disagreed with term limits, because the lack of continuity could jeopardize long-range planning. He said that a regional action plan needs long-term community "champions" to be the public face of the effort.

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Festus wrote:

Houston is widely recognized for its unique growth opportunities. Unfortunately, it is also becoming renown for horrific traffic congestion, and quality employers are going to hesitate to relocate here. We will never be able to completely build our way out of this mess, so the Mayor should follow up on two commitments he made after being inaugurated:

1. Traffic light sequencing. Sequencing doesn't work without continual monitoring and maintenance. The maintenance force is either under-staffed or not performing.
2. Staggered working hours for employees of major corporations. There needs to be an effective financial incentive for corporations who contract with the City to allow their employees the option of working off-peak hours, e.g., 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. & 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. It is unnecessarily stressful, wasteful and immoral to continue having vast numbers of gridlocked commuters attempting to drive to and from work at the same time.

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