Sustainable Development
THE GREATER HOUSTON PARTNERSHIP'S PRINCIPLES FOR SENSIBLE GROWTH: A SUMMARY

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Support for Smart Growth

• The Greater Houston Partnership is the Houston area’s premier business organization, dedicated to building economic prosperity in the region.

• Our members represent the largest Houston area companies and also many of the smallest.

• We are proud to say that we are, in general, supportive of Smart Growth.

• And the reason is that Smart Growth can truly be anything that we want it to be.

• However many individuals and organizations have defined Smart Growth, for their purposes, in ways that our organization is not likely to support.

• So in crafting our policy, we preferred to use the term sensible growth.

The Greater Houston Partnership’s Support for Sensible Growth

The Greater Houston Partnership supports the following principles for urban growth in the Houston area.

We define Sensible Growth as smart decision-making on public policy issues, budgets, planning, programs, and ordinances that work toward five primary goals:

• Enhance the quality of life in the region, including access to recreational, entertainment, and economic opportunities; low cost of living; quality education; and open space;

• Encourage a wide variety of individual and family choices for neighborhoods including single-family homes, townhouses, garden apartments, and high-rise housing at market driven densities;

• Encourage commercial, retail and office, workplaces within reasonable distances from residential areas and industrial workplaces in appropriate areas;

• Encourage transportation solutions that are efficient, cost effective and environmentally friendly;

• Encourage the continued revitalization of our neighborhoods and development of new neighborhoods.
Furthermore, the Greater Houston Partnership feels Sensible Growth practices should:

- Reduce traffic congestion and improve air and water quality and increase open space;
- Use market mechanisms, public incentives, and private sector partnerships to impact the development and redevelopment pattern in a manner in which the region desires to progress;
- Include all stakeholders in the debate and decision making process, consider the priorities of all stakeholders with a view towards achieving long-term and sustainable growth in the region;
- Remove the barriers to cooperation between the public and private sector in ways that are beneficial for the community, retain the clear accountability of the public sector to the citizens, and instill a sense of urgency in the public sector to respond to the need for projects and programs that implement sensible growth initiatives;
- Understand that these are unique solutions for the region due to its economic base, location and constituency and that sensible growth initiatives may take the form of many different processes, projects, or programs, but each initiative should strive to implement the five primary goals.

We are strongly supportive of quality development that will improve our quality of life.

*The Greater Houston Partnership is not advocating many initiatives*

The Greater Houston Partnership is not advocating:

- Urban growth boundaries;
- Regional government regulating land uses; or
- Elimination of funding for highway construction and expansion

*Is Sprawl the culprit?*

To many of the advocates of smart growth, the culprit is SPRAWL and the enemy is suburban growth.

They say that sprawl is bad because:

- Sprawl is less efficient for provision of infrastructure and services;
- Sprawl causes longer trips and dependence on the automobile;
- Sprawl creates environmental degradation in air and water quality;
- Sprawl consumes valuable agricultural land, open space and wilderness; and
- Suburban community fabric is weak
Countering the Sprawl Myths

- Sprawl may be a more efficient system of providing infrastructure for growth, particularly in Houston.
- Suburban growth in Houston includes many employment activity centers that, some research suggests, will produce shorter work trips but still dependent on the automobile.

- Low-density suburban neighborhoods are the choice of the vast majority of families. Creation of, and exposure to, adverse environmental conditions including air quality, water quality, noise, lack of access to sunlight can be achieved easier in low density development.
- Many recent studies have demonstrated that urban development accounts for only .3 of 1% of the total land area in the U.S. and does not contribute materially to the loss of agricultural land, open space and wilderness.
- The last myth that the fabric of the suburban community is weaker than dense inner cities points out a central weakness of the anti-sprawl argument -- it is subjective and provides a philosophy that the only proper way to live is in high cost, high density urban communities.

High Quality Urban Research Provides Answers

- The "Growth Options for Houston" research project that Rice Center completed 20 years ago that addressed the same issue -- "Could government policies change the patterns of growth in Houston to encourage more development in the inner city (inside Loop 610)?"
- We tested an "Inner-City" growth scenario where a number of programs were initiated to make the inner-city more attractive for development
- If all programs were implemented, we predicted that about 10% of the expected growth from 1975 to 2000 could be redirected into the inner city.
- For the other 90%, the die was cast in the form of affordable, attractive suburbs with massive amounts of land in the hands of developers and builders, already platted and ready to go, and with schools that were highly rated.
- On the positive side, the inner city growth amounted to 120,000 net new households over a 20-yr. period
- Other growth patterns were investigated including one called "Multiple Activity Centers."
- In the second phase of this project, we evaluated the "Trends," the "Inner-City" and the "Multiple Activity Centers" options to determine which was the most efficient in use of public facilities and services and which had the fewest negative environmental effects. The conclusion was -- there was no discernable difference. Commuting patterns were not discernibly different and air and water quality was not significantly improved in any of the options.
Market forces will always define growth patterns.

- Many cities that thought that they were already controlling development, such as Atlanta, Minneapolis and Seattle, have found that the patterns of urban development in those communities are no different than in Houston.
- This is because most families prefer the entire package of amenities that they get with suburban living.
- Portland, with its urban growth boundaries and light rail systems, is the "poster child" of smart growth.
  - Yet in the past 10 years, Portland's housing prices have increased 140 percent compared with 60 percent here in the Houston region.
  - The Portland light rail system, as successful as it is, carries daily commuters equivalent to one freeway lane during the peak period and only one-fifth of the passengers of a freeway lane on a daily basis,

Carrots are better than sticks.

- Bob Lanier, as Houston's mayor, took a "carrot" approach to inner city development with his neighborhoods to standards program.
- His expressed intent was to make investments in the City that would, over time, make the City more attractive to private sector developers.
- Today, Houston's downtown is booming as we are seeing the positive results of that program in the inner city.
- The bottom line is that it takes a great deal of human, political and financial capital to change market forces.
- The virtue of markets is that they give people what they want.
- No developer has ever gotten rich by building housing and commercial projects that people dislike.
- No city strengthens its tax base by promoting developments that are unpopular, unprofitable and badly located.

We believe that the Smart Growth movement has many positive aspects.

- Support quality development, development standards that will clearly produce a high quality of life for our residents, inner-city revitalization, and programs to reduce traffic congestion.

But also believe that there are potential downsides:
- Those increased government regulations and controls that eliminate individual choices and
- Very expensive investment and incentive programs designed to make our community more "efficient."
The Port of Houston, with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is deepening and widening the Houston Ship Channel from a configuration of 400 feet wide by 40 feet deep to 530 feet wide by 45 feet deep and extending the channel another 3.4 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Approximately 70% of all dredged material will be used to create beneficial use sites over the 50-year project life.

The Beneficial Uses Group (BUG), established in 1990, was charged with the development of an environmentally responsible utilization plan for materials dredged during the Houston Ship Channel expansion.

The BUG conducted extensive research to determine the environmental, economic and engineering impacts of possible uses for the materials. They also went to the community to listen to peoples concerns and recommendations. Based on their research and input from the public, the Group developed a plan to use the dredged soils as building materials. The plan includes:

• construction of 4,500 acres of salt marsh to partially restore lost wetlands acreage
• construction of a six-acre bird-nesting island
• construction of an underwater berm to provide topographic relief for fishery habitat
• restoration of two previously existing islands: Goat Island, in Buffalo Bayou, and Redfish Island, in Galveston Bay
• construction of access channels and anchorages for recreational boaters in mid and lower Galveston Bay.