



UPDATE on Issues

League of Women Voters of the Houston Area October 2006

SMART GROWTH

In November 2005 the Houston Area LWV Board “signed-on” to Smart Growth Principles:

- Mixed land uses
- Take advantage of existing community assets
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
- Foster walkable, close-knit neighborhoods
- Promote distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place, including the rehabilitation and use of historic buildings
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas
- Strengthen and encourage growth in existing communities
- Provide a variety of transportation choices
- Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective
- Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions.

What does this mean? It means that the local League joins a group of local environmental organizations united in supporting these principles and tries to influence the process of planning for growth in the region.

It means if Houston were to develop smartly, there would be fewer transportation problems, cleaner air and water and more natural areas. It means **density development** in the city and natural areas outside the city.

In 2006 the groups began to meet and to develop ideas and strategies that would advance these principles. The groups are

Trees for Houston
Katy Prairie Conservancy
Park People
Sea Grant
Gulf Coast Institute
Greater Houston Preservation Association
Bayou Preservation Association
League of Women Voters Houston Area

The League is interested in these principles because of its state position on Natural Resources: To achieve conservation, protection, and judicious development of the state’s natural resources which would include air, land use and water.

Facts: The Houston region will have 3.5 million more people in it in 2035. That’s how many people live in the City of Los Angeles today. Current forecasts, based on continued trends and policies, show the region will lose between 1,000 and 1,500 square miles of natural service areas and agricultural lands, large parts of it in wetlands, and all of it in a thick network of watersheds that drain ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico.

Some 5 billion square feet of new development is expected. Hundreds of acres of a variety of forest and riparian land are forecast to be developed. Eleven thousand land-miles of new road projects are planned. Vehicle miles traveled is expected to rise about 70 percent, with accompanying air quality issues.

Loss of wetlands and other natural areas has a direct impact on the water quality of the bayous and bays of the Houston region, many of which already do not meet designated uses. A recent study revealed the loss to development of at least 18% of the freshwater prairie wetlands in Harris County from 1992-2002. Virtually all such land will disappear in Harris County according to the forecasts, and the effect is spreading quickly to surrounding counties.

These losses are projected because the model--or vision--that leaders and developers in the region have is of the kind of growth that consumes large quantities of land. The Houston region needs a new model that will sustain the economy, improve the quality of life, and preserve important environmental assets.

Opportunity

In 2007 the region will be finishing the **2035 Regional Transportation Plan**, and then will begin on the one for 2040. By the end of the first year of the proposed project, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the metropolitan planning organization that is responsible for the plan, will begin the public process for the vision for that plan. Because transportation has more impact on land use than any other factor, this is an opportunity to overlay a new visual model for the future.

The basis for the model would be the work that has come out of the current visioning process, in which citizens called for these values to be recognized:

- Conservation of green space
- Linear parks on the bayous
- Respect for floodplains
- More transit and less road development
- The idea of mixed use “town centers” and “urban villages” in a number of sizes
- Shorter work trips

These values underlie the basic model of traditional town-building and Smart Growth with busy, convenient centers, housing clustered around the centers. No matter what its name, this model is based on compactness, or density. Density has proven very difficult to explain and sell. So far the only methods that are successful are those employing visualization.

Another tool that is beginning to have real value is the Transect of New Urbanism. This flowing segmentation of natural/rural/sub-urban/urban types provides the key, building great towns and cities that have the full spectrum of lifestyle arrangements in the most compact and efficient way.

Issues:

How can communities across multiple jurisdictions make planning decisions?

How can the built infrastructure best be developed to align with collective long term environmental economic and social goals?

What are the levels and types of human activities that can be conducted within a given spatial area without critically and adversely altering biogeochemical cycles in ecosystem functioning?

--Carolyn Mata