

# *City of Houston* **HANDBOOK**

SIXTH EDITION

**History and Facts About Houston**

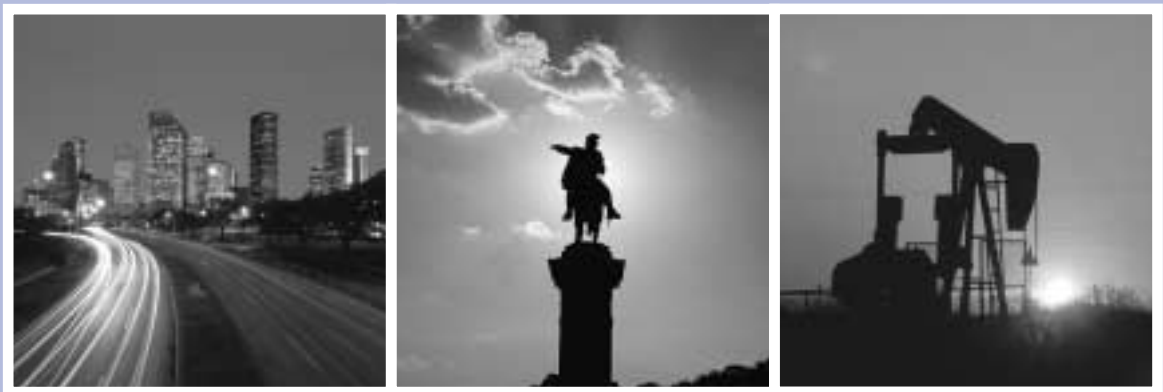
**City Government • Municipal Court System**

**Finance and Administration**

**Public Safety • Libraries and Parks**

**Public Works • Planning and Development**

**Human and Cultural Services**



**League of Women Voters of the Houston Area**





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This handbook is the work of many individuals. The list of City of Houston employees who contributed data, information and maps and reviewed the work in progress is unfortunately too long to include here, but to each of them a special thank you. A very real debt of gratitude is owed Madeleine Appel who coordinated the author's contacts with City of Houston departments, provided important research assistance and maintained a consistent sense of good humor in the face of the author's constant demands. Judy Hollinger and Sydney Elliott of the League provided good ideas and invaluable editorial assistance. And, as usual, Sherry Collier brought her special blend of creativity and craftsmanship to the final product.

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# Preface

**H**ouston. The name evokes images of cowboys, wildcatters and astronauts. Houston is the “Bayou City,” “Space City, USA,” “Port City” and the oil capital of the world. Houston is renowned for the Astros and Texans, the Rockets and Comets, its world-class arts organizations and facilities and for its infamous combination of heat, humidity and air-conditioning. Most fundamentally, however, Houston is defined and shaped by its citizens, some two million individuals of every race, creed and color, dozens of nationalities, and every walk of life.

The League of Women Voters of the Houston Area presents the City of Houston Handbook in recognition of the important role that individual citizens play in the life of Houston and in the belief that an informed and active citizenry is essential to the city’s well-being. The Handbook’s purpose is to present an overview of Houston’s government so

that Houston citizens may more actively participate in the selection of its key officials and more directly influence its decision-making processes.

Residents who wish a more detailed examination of City of Houston operations and departments are encouraged to visit the City of Houston’s website at [www.houstontx.gov](http://www.houstontx.gov). Citizens should also make use of the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline for up-to-date information about department hours, court schedules and the like, and to request City services.



# Introduction

## HOUSTON FACTS

**H**ouston covers 579 square miles of flat coastal prairie on the upper Gulf Coast of Texas. Lying just south of the 30th meridian, approximately 50 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, its climate is generally temperate with mild winters, hot summers and tropical weather in the form of occasional tropical storms or a rare hurricane coming inland from the Gulf. Houston is sometimes called the “Bayou City” for the network of bayous that cross the city, generally running west to east into Buffalo Bayou, the largest of them. Buffalo Bayou has served for nearly 170 years as the city’s critical commercial lifeline to the Gulf of Mexico, but it and its tributaries have occasionally been the source of serious flooding.

Houston was founded in 1836 by Augustus and John Kirby Allen, land speculators who claimed that Buffalo Bayou could provide access to the new city by ocean-going vessels sailing from New York and New Orleans and cited its “pleasant” climate as a reason for settlement. The Allen brothers named the city after General Sam Houston, leader of the victorious forces in

the just-concluded Texas Revolutionary War. From 1837 to 1839 Houston served as the capital of the new Republic of Texas. Houston’s growth through the nineteenth century was largely a result of its role as an important transshipment point in the burgeoning two-way trade between Texas’ interior and the Gulf of Mexico. Agricultural commodities – cotton, corn, cattle hides – and natural resources like timber were brought to Houston to be loaded on river steamers for the voyage down Buffalo Bayou to Galveston for shipment to national and foreign ports. Essential supplies – agricultural implements, tools, cloth, flour, coffee – made the journey up from Galveston to Houston for shipment into the interior of Texas. Houston’s linkage to Texas’ growing network of railroads in the middle of the century served to accelerate this trade.

Two events early in the twentieth century were important turning points in the city’s history. In 1901, the great Spindletop Gusher in Beaumont, 90 miles to the east, launched an oil boom that transformed both Houston and Texas.

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### HOUSTON FACTS *continued*

Houston's proximity to Spindletop and to the soon-to-be-discovered East Texas oilfields as well as the discovery of important deposits of oil, natural gas and sulfur even closer to the city laid the foundation for its later prominence as a world leader in energy. Equally important was the completion in 1914 of the Houston Ship Channel, the culmination of numerous attempts to improve navigation on Buffalo Bayou. The Ship Channel, extending through Galveston Bay and up Buffalo Bayou to the Turning Basin near downtown Houston, allowed ocean-going vessels to bypass Galveston and sail directly to Houston. The Ship Channel also played an integral role in the city's development as an energy center, providing not only improved transportation for oil, but also serving as a key site for petroleum processing. In 1918, Sinclair Oil Company built the first oil refinery on the Ship Channel, the first of many such facilities that would eventually comprise one of the largest concentrations of petrochemical processing facilities anywhere in the world.

Houston's modern era began with the Second World War. Wartime demand for oil and gas and for petroleum products like synthetic rubber dramatically stimulated both the city's energy industries and its port. The United States' great post-

Houston at its center, has also grown substantially with a population estimated in 2005 at more than 5 million people. Houston has also grown dramatically in land area, since 1949 adding more than 500 square miles.

Today, with more than two million inhabitants, the City of Houston is the largest city in Texas and the fourth largest in the United States. Its population is notable for its diversity. The 2000 Census revealed that 37.4% of Houstonians are Hispanic and 25% African American; more than a quarter are foreign-born. Petroleum and shipping continue to be the twin linchpins of the city's economy. Houston is the acknowledged center of the world's energy industry, home to companies and corporations that lead the nation and the world in energy research, exploration, production and processing. The Port of Houston currently leads the United States in foreign waterborne commerce and ranks second in overall tonnage. In recent decades, Houston's economy has diversified with medicine, science and technology playing increasingly important roles. The Texas Medical Center, founded in 1945, is the site of one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive concentrations of hospitals and medical teaching facilities and is renowned as a leader in medical treat-

ment, research and education. Since 1961, Houston has been home to the Johnson Space Center, focal point of the United States' manned space program and home to its astronauts. Over the past decade, Houston universities have been at the forefront of developments in such groundbreaking fields as nanotechnology and superfluidity. Houston has also

become a major cultural center, noted for such leading visual and performing arts institutions as the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the Menil Collection, the Houston Ballet, the Houston Symphony, the Houston Grand Opera and the Alley Theatre.

*Petroleum and shipping  
continue to be the twin linchpins  
of the city's economy.*

war economic boom served to increase demand for those products and launched a long period of growth for the City of Houston. The city nearly tripled its population between 1940 and 1960 and added more than a million people between 1960 and 2005. The Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area, a region comprised of ten counties with

## CITY GOVERNMENT IN TEXAS

Cities in Texas operate within a framework established by federal and state law and the requirements of the Constitution of the United States and the Texas Constitution. In Texas, each city depends upon state law for its creation and organization and for its authority to govern. Texas recognizes two categories of cities: “general law” cities, those with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and “home rule” cities, those with 5,000 or more inhabitants. General law cities operate under much tighter state supervision than their larger counterparts, generally being held to the principle that they can exercise only those powers expressly granted them by state law. Home rule cities, like Houston, can take any action not expressly prohibited by state or federal law or the Texas and U.S. constitutions. This allows such cities some freedom of action with respect to issues as varied as their form of government, the right to annex without the approval of those being annexed and the authority to pass city ordinances.

Every city in Texas faces the incontrovertible fact that there is no such thing as total freedom from state authority. A variety of important concerns, from city tax rates and employee policies to annexation, are subject to state control. The state legislature regularly considers legislation designed to directly or indirectly influence city ordinances and city government in general.

Cities are allowed some leeway with respect to the type of government each adopts. Houston city government has evolved through a number of forms since the city’s founding. Through most of the nineteenth century, Houston operated under a mayor/alderman form of government with each alderman representing one of the six wards into which the city was divided. In the first years of the twentieth century, Houston, like many cities, experimented with new forms of city government, adopting a commission system in which elected

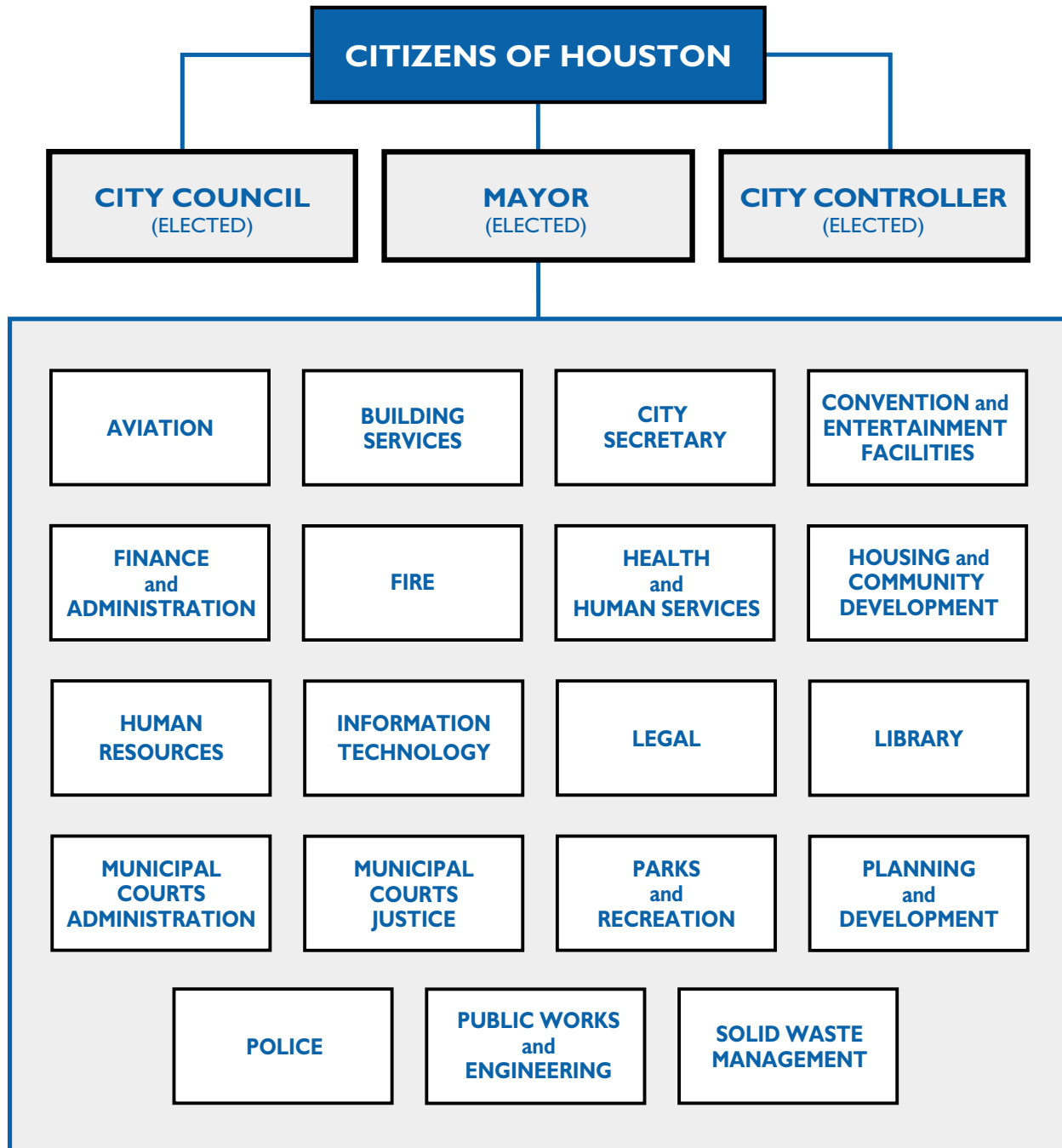
commissioners ran the city. In the 1940’s, the city tried the city manager form in which an elected mayor and council hire a city manager, a professional administrator, to run the city’s affairs. In 1947, Houston adopted the strong mayor/council system now in use. Texas’ other large cities, including San Antonio, Dallas and Austin, continue to use the city manager model.

In the strong mayor/council form of government, responsibility for policy and policy implementation resides in the office of an elected mayor. The mayor acts as the city’s political leader and as its chief administrator with responsibility for preparing the budget, hiring and firing department heads and, in general, running the affairs of the city. The city council acts as the city’s legislature, possessing the power to accept or reject the mayor’s initiatives and appointments and representing the needs of the districts from which council members are elected.

*Every city in Texas faces the incontrovertible fact that there is no such thing as total freedom from state authority.*

Relations between the mayor and council in this form of city government are not necessarily rigid and exact. Power shifts according to the relative strengths and weaknesses of the mayor and the council and each of its members. A popular and politically adept mayor may gain power in such a system; a less able mayor may lose power, especially when faced with a council determined to enact its own agenda.

# CITY OF HOUSTON ORGANIZATION CHART



## BUDGET, FINANCE AND CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

The preparation and financing of a yearly budget and oversight of the city's capital improvements program are important concerns for Houston's leaders and administrators. Houston's fiscal year 2005 budget (July 1, 2004 to June 30, 2005) is more than 2.8 billion dollars and the cost of its 2005-2009 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) is more than 4 billion dollars. These figures take on even greater significance when one realizes that they are larger than the budgets and infrastructure costs of several states and more than a few nations.

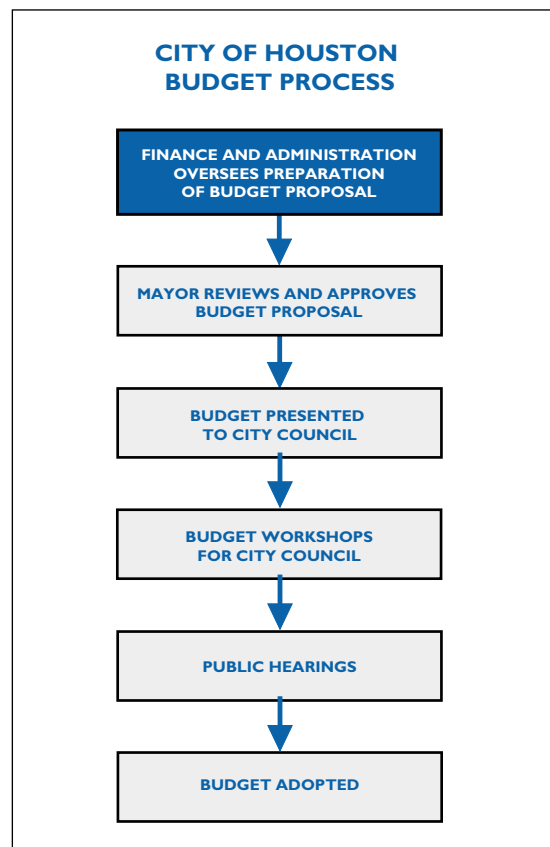
Preparation of Houston's annual budgets is the job of the Mayor's Office and its administrative departments. The Director of Finance and Administration works closely with city departments to craft the annual budget. Once prepared, the Mayor submits the final budget to the City Council for amendment and final approval. Typically, City Council holds budget workshops to review the Mayor's proposals. Public hearings are also a part of the budget process.

Revenues to support the annual budget come from a variety of sources. By far the largest are property (*ad valorem*) taxes assessed on the market value of real property and the city's share of sales taxes collected by the state. The city also derives considerable income from franchise fees, the sale of licenses and permits and various types of fines and forfeitures. Major infrastructure improvements are usually funded through the sale of general obligation bonds and revenue bonds.

Houston's total budget is actually the sum of the many separate funds needed to support city operations and meet its obligations. Although there is some overlap of responsibilities and revenue sources, the budget generally groups these separate funds into four major categories: the General Fund, Enterprise Funds, Special Funds and the Debt Service Fund.

**General Fund:** the largest of the four, the General Fund is supported primarily by revenue from property and sales taxes and additional income from franchise taxes, licenses and permits, and Municipal Court fines. It covers the major operating responsibilities of the City of Houston, including:

- The Fire and Police Departments and Municipal Court system;
- Cultural services and activities such as the Houston Public Library and Houston's park system;
- The services of the city's Health and Human Services and Housing and Community Development Departments;
- Administrative services for the Office of Mayor, the City Council and related departments;
- Garbage collection, street repair and maintenance of city buildings.



**Enterprise Funds:** The three funds that comprise this category have in common the fact that each is solely financed by user fees.

- The Aviation Fund supports operations at the city's major air facilities and draws revenue from landing and hangar rental fees, airport retail and auto rental concessions and airport parking garage income.
- The Convention and Entertainment Facilities Fund is responsible for the George R. Brown

**BUDGET, FINANCE AND CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS** *continued*

Convention Center and for such cultural and entertainment venues as Jones Hall and Wortham Center and the parking garages and public plazas near those facilities. Hotel taxes, parking fees and a variety of rental and concession fees are its chief revenue sources.

- The Combined Utility Systems Fund draws its revenue from user fees paid by Houston citizens and businesses and supports Houston’s water, sewage treatment and storm water drainage systems.

**Special Funds:** These funds exist to handle revenues and expenditures restricted to certain specific purposes. For example, the Cable Television Fund receives fees paid by local cable television operators and disburses them to support the city’s public access channels. In all there are 13 special funds in this category, including the Houston Emergency Center Fund and the Houston TransStar Fund.

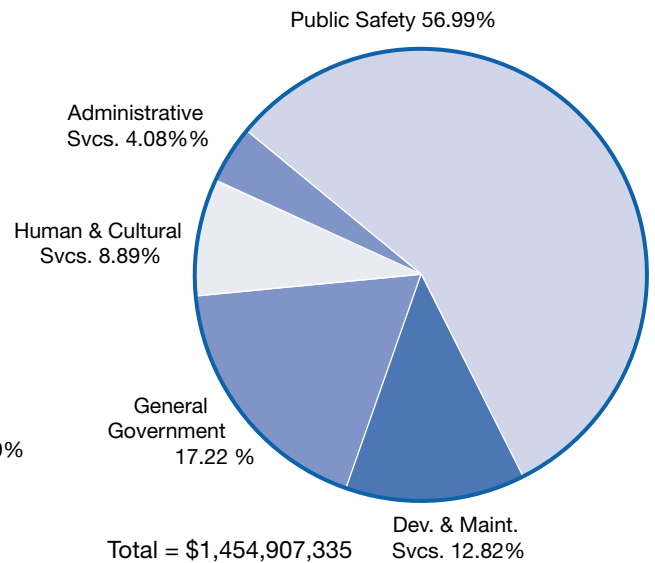
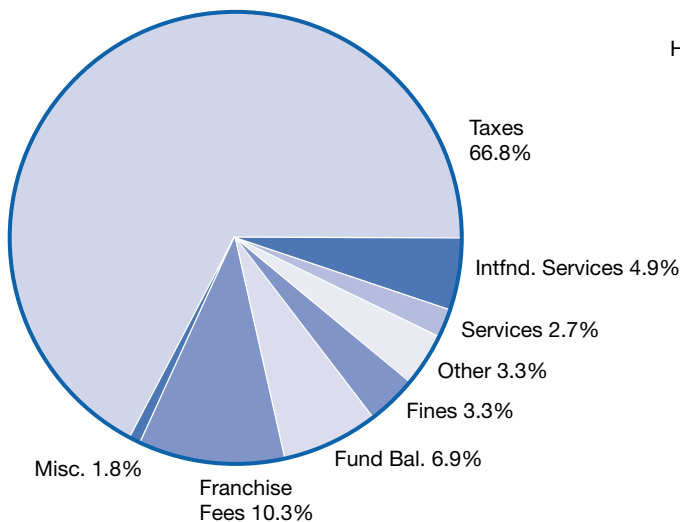
**Debt Service Funds:** These funds contain the monies necessary to service or retire debt incurred when the city issues bonds to pay for major capital improvement projects. The city issues two types of bonds:

- General obligation bonds: require voter approval for amounts larger than \$100,000 and are retired by the city’s tax revenues;

- Revenue bonds: are retired by revenue received from the Enterprise Fund operations that use them. For example, airport revenues deposited in the Aviation Fund are used to retire revenue bonds that support improvements at the city’s airports.

Capital improvements funded by the city’s sale of general obligation and revenue bonds are administered through five-year Capital Improvement Plans (CIP). Since 1983, the City of Houston has engaged in a continuous process of reviewing and analyzing the city’s infrastructure needs and preparing a series of five-year plans to see that those needs are met. The CIP process includes citizen input through public meetings and recommendations from City Council and city departments. An initial CIP draft is prepared by the Mayor’s Office with assistance from the Finance and Administration Department and input from the Public Works and Engineering Department before submission to the Mayor. The Mayor presents the CIP to the City Council which holds public hearings before final approval and adoption.

**GENERAL FUND REVENUES**



**GENERAL FUND EXPENDITURES**

# Administration and Administrative Services

Responsibility for administering the affairs of the City of Houston rests with the occupants of three elective offices: the Office of the Mayor, the City Council and the City Controller's Office. Although each has specific, well-defined duties, in practice some aspects of city governance are shared among them. The Mayor, for example, is the city's chief executive, but also serves as a voting member of the City Council. Houston's government also practices its own form of the checks-and-balances system common to other levels of government in the United States. The Mayor has the power to appoint heads of departments and prepare the annual budget; the City Council has the authority to review and approve or disapprove the Mayor's appointments and initiatives and to review and amend, as needed, the budget. The City Controller, charged with ensuring the financial well-being of the city, is independent of both the Mayor and Council and serves as the city's financial watchdog. In that capacity, the Office of the City Controller audits city departmental financial and management processes.

## OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

The Mayor is elected to serve a two-year term with a limit of three terms in all. The position is considered a full-time job and its occupant is paid an annual salary set by state law as a percentage of a district court judge's salary. In 2005, the Mayor's salary was set at \$165,817. The Mayor has been variously described as the city's chief executive and administrator, the chief enforcer of city laws and ordinances, and as its official greeter. He also plays an important legislative role, serving as the leader and a voting member of the City Council. In the strong mayor/council form of government he is the city's leader and its strongest political figure.

The Mayor performs several key functions in city government, including:

- Overseeing the administration of all city departments;

Term limits affect the tenure of each of these positions. The Mayor, Controller and members of City Council are elected to two-year terms with term limits law limiting service to three terms in all. For Council members, the three-term restriction is defined as total service on the Council with no distinction made between election to single-member or at-large positions.

*The Mayor, Controller and members of City Council are limited to three terms of service*

City administration also includes the City Secretary, the Department of Finance and Administration, the Legal Department, the Human Resources Department and the Information Technology Department. Directors of all city departments are appointed by the mayor with approval by the City Council.

- Preparing the city's annual budget for submission to City Council;
- Enforcing city ordinances and laws;
- Appointing the heads of city departments and members of the Civil Service Commission;
- Setting the City Council agenda as well as presiding over its meetings, appointing its committee chairs, signing its ordinances and resolutions and serving as a voting member.

The Office of Mayor contains divisions that promote affirmative action programs, assist citizens in handling requests for service from city departments and resolving problems and complaints and provide services to small businesses. It also deals with public safety and homeland security issues, including management of Houston's Emergency Center and its 9-1-1 network.

### CITY COUNCIL

The City Council plays two important roles in governing Houston. First, it is the city's legislative body and has the authority to:

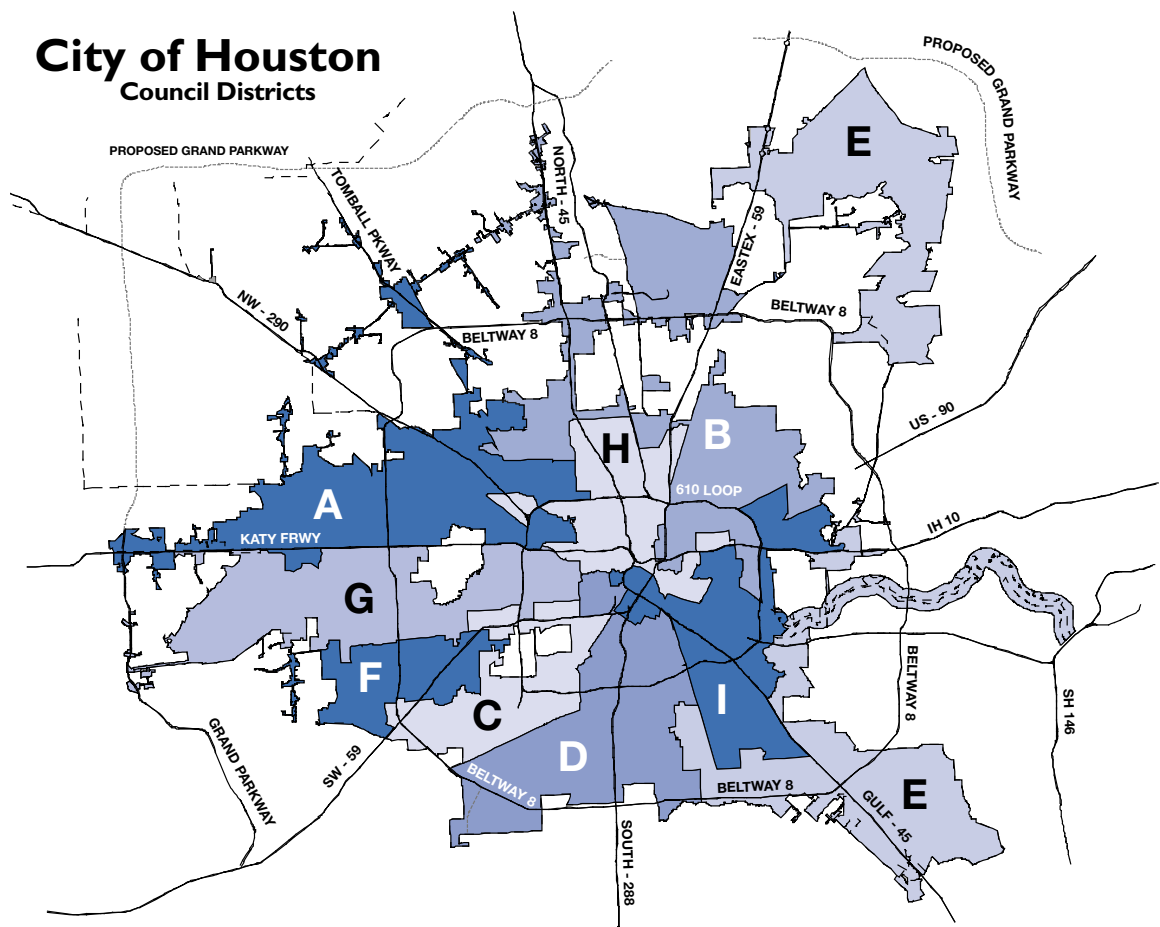
- Pass city ordinances;
- Amend and approve the annual budget;
- Issue bonds and award contracts;
- Approve city expenditures over \$25,000;
- Confirm appointments by the Mayor.

Second, is the Council's focus on representation. Each member is elected to a two-year term and is limited to three terms in all. Nine of its members are elected from single-member districts and represent the specific needs of those individual districts. Five members are elected to at-large positions and represent both city-wide and neighborhood needs.

Although the position is officially considered to be part-time, council members typically work long hours. Each member receives a budget allocation to cover office and staff expenses and a salary set as a percentage of state district judges' salaries as deter-

mined by the state legislature. As a result of a pay increase that took effect in 2004, Council members are eligible to receive an annual salary of \$49,795.

City Council meetings are held each week on Tuesdays at 1:30PM and Wednesdays beginning at 9:00AM in the Council Chambers located on the second floor of City Hall. All meetings are open to the public. Meeting agendas are prepared by the Mayor who is also the presiding officer unless he is absent, in which case the Mayor Pro Tem presides in his place. The Tuesday meeting is reserved for public comments by individuals who have signed up to speak through the City Secretary's Office at least thirty minutes prior to the public session. Wednesday meetings are business meetings where agenda items are considered, but may also include public hearings, the Mayor's Report, and items raised informally by Council Members and known as "pop-offs."



### CITY CONTROLLER

Houston's City Controller is elected rather than appointed. This allows the City Controller to operate as an equal partner within the upper administrative ranks of Houston's government and to play a checks-and-balances role, particularly with respect to the city's financial affairs. The City Controller is elected to a two-year term with a limit of three terms.

The City Controller is the second highest elected official in the City of Houston and serves as the city's financial watchdog. Among the Controller's most important roles are those of certifying the availability of funds before City Council makes financial commitments, processing and monitoring disbursements, investing the city's funds, conducting internal audits of city departments and federal grant programs, and conducting the sale of city general obligation and revenue bonds. The Controller also participates informally in the city's budget process by providing independent revenue estimates of funds that will be

available to support expenditures enumerated in the proposed budget. Each spring, the Controller certifies the availability of funds needed to support the city budget.

The Office of City Controller facilitates the operation of Houston's financial management processes through the following divisions:

- **Financial Reporting:** prepares the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report and other reports as needed;
- **Operations and Technical Services:** issues all checks, certifies the availability of funds, operates the city's financial management system and provides technical support for all Controller's Office Computer services;
- **Treasury:** manages Houston's investment portfolio and participates in the issuance and management of city bonds;
- **Audit Division:** conducts financial and management audits of city operations.

*Houston's  
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### CITY SECRETARY

The City Secretary is responsible for recording and preserving Council minutes and city ordinances and acts as the custodian of these records. Additional functions include providing upon request

certified copies of Council proceedings and serving as the recipient for bid proposals from vendors. The City Secretary also oversees City of Houston elections when they are city-only elections.

### DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The Department of Finance and Administration supports and monitors the financial, administrative and regulatory affairs of the City of Houston and provides advice and counsel to the Mayor, City Council and city departments regarding budgetary and financial matters. Finance and Administration's major functions include:

- **Budgeting:** under the direction of the Mayor's Office, prepares the annual budget, oversees the annual budget and administers and monitors budget and expenditure functions;
- **Finance:** monitors the financial activities of city departments, oversees the issuance of debt, prepares monthly financial reports and provides financial advice and long-term financial planning for the Mayor and Council;
- **Administration:** coordinates the activities of and exercises administrative oversight over city departments and provides administrative services including accounting, collections and records management;
- **Regulation:** administers and enforces city regulations concerning commercial permits, franchises, transportation and utilities;
- **Purchasing:** is the primary department authorized to issue bid invitations and proposals and process purchase orders and works with city departments to facilitate effective purchasing practices;
- **Accounting:** provides billing, collections, and accounting services for city activities and oversees delinquent property tax collections and hotel tax billing services.

### LEGAL DEPARTMENT

The Legal Department, headed by the City Attorney, provides legal counsel and services that allow city officials to work effectively within the complex system of federal and state laws and regulations that govern city activities and operations. The department provides legal advice to the Mayor and Council, oversees election and redistricting processes and drafts ordinances and opinions. It represents the city in commercial, civil rights and contract litigation. It plays an essential

role in a variety of real estate, land use and environmental matters including eminent domain proceedings, annexation, administrative hearings over water and wastewater permits and utility rate regulation and violations of pollution laws. The department also represents the city in Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Service Commission hearings and deals with any litigation arising from federal and state employment law and regulations.

*The City of Houston employs a diverse workforce of approximately 20,000 employees.*

### HUMAN RESOURCES

The City of Houston employs a diverse workforce of approximately 20,000 employees. Human resources services for those individuals and the departments that employ them are the responsibility of the Human Resources Department (HRD). HRD oversees the hiring process for city departments, designs and manages the city's compensation, job classification and performance management programs and administers its comprehensive

employee benefits program. It is also responsible for employee relations programs, including the City of Houston's grievance process. It provides administrative support for the Civil Service Commission. Other responsibilities include managing employee personnel records, providing formal training and staff development, administering promotional examinations for the Houston Fire Department and overseeing the Employee Assistance Program.

### INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The role of the Information Technology Department (IT) has grown in importance as new technologies have come to play an important part in City of Houston operations and its ability to deliver services to Houston citizens. Advances in information and communication technology—more powerful computers, better software, the development of the Internet—have influenced everything from the city's libraries to its ability to provide effective fire and police protection and run its airports. IT, for example, supports the Houston Public Library's extensive use of computer-based applica-

tions, plays a key part in improving and maintaining the Fire and Police Departments' dispatch capabilities and is ubiquitous in city departments. IT also plays an important role in facilitating citizen interaction with the City of Houston by supporting and overseeing the city's websites.

Overall administrative responsibility for IT rests with its Chief Information Officer, assisted by Chief Technology Officers who represent IT in city departments with significant information technology needs.

# Public Safety, Security and Justice

In a city as populous and expansive as Houston, it is not surprising that safety and security concerns command an important share of its government's attention and the city's resources. Houston's increasingly international character – its important role as an international gateway and crossroads – and recent national and international events – the

war on international terror, in particular – have served only to increase the importance of those concerns. The City of Houston addresses its safety and security issues through the Houston Police Department (HPD), the Houston Fire Department (HFD) and its Municipal Court System.

## HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

The Houston Police Department (HPD) is under the direction of the Chief of Police, assisted by a command staff of four executive assistant chiefs and nine assistant chiefs who take responsibility for the department's operations. Department administration also includes two civilian deputy directors who provide legal and financial advice to the Chief. In 2005 HPD employed more than 6,000 individuals, with more than 5,000 of that number directly involved in law enforcement activities.

The great majority of Houston's police are the patrol officers who are usually the first to make direct contact with citizens in need of police assistance. Patrol officers are assigned to the North and South Patrol Commands which consist of twelve districts divided over Houston's nearly 600 square mile jurisdiction.

Specialized police services are delivered through HPD's other commands, including:

- **Tactical Support:** provides specialized support to patrol officers through teams such as its bomb squad and SWAT;
- **Criminal Investigations:** contains HPD's traditional detective units;

- **Special Investigations:** handles undercover investigations of vice, drug-trafficking and organized crime operations;
- **Information Services:** has responsibility for departmental communications, suspect identification and HPD's detention facilities;
- **Professional Development:** runs HPD's police academy and provides continuing education and training to officers and civilian employees.



*Houston Police Officer*

### HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Houston Fire Department (HFD) is responsible for fire protection and prevention and emergency medical services. HFD employs more than 4,000 individuals, including nearly 3,500 firefighters and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel, operates 89 fire stations and 155 pieces of firefighting equipment, including pump and ladder trucks and more specialized vehicles, and 100 EMS vehicles. It is headed by the Fire Chief, assisted by four Assistant Chiefs and 21 District Chiefs. The department is organized into four major command divisions, each comprised of specialized units that deliver HFD services. Those commands include:

- **Operations:** has primary responsibility for firefighting and emergency medical services and includes EMS and the more than 300 paramedics who staff EMS ambulances;
- **Planning and Homeland Security:** handles emergency responses to specialized types of incidents involving hazardous materials,

firefighting and rescue operations at the city's airports and special types of rescue such as vehicle entrapments and building collapses; also includes departmental operations involved in local emergency management activities and response to potential nuclear, biological and/or chemical situations;

- **Logistics:** is responsible for dispatching HFD personnel to fires, accidents and other emergency situations and handles professional training and development, including recruit training, through its Val Jahnke Training Center;
- **Fire Marshal:** is chiefly responsible for HFD's fire inspection program and its fire safety education programs and for the Houston Arson Bureau which investigates all fires where arson is a suspected cause.

*In an average day, the Municipal Courts deal with nearly 15,000 citizens, either in person or through telephone and mail inquiries.*

### MUNICIPAL COURTS SYSTEM

Houston's Municipal Courts System is one of the largest in the nation. In an average day, the Municipal Courts deal with nearly 15,000 citizens, either in person or through telephone and mail inquiries. The primary duty of these courts is to handle misdemeanor cases involving violations of state law and/or city ordinances. These violations are most likely to involve traffic or parking offenses, but may also involve health, safety, or fire offenses and fine-only criminal conduct misdemeanor offenses. Court judges also serve as magistrates with authority to issue warrants from the Houston Police Department and other Harris County law enforcement agencies. The Municipal Courts also administer such programs as its Teenage Community Alternative Program.

Heading the Municipal Courts System Judicial Department is the Presiding Judge. Nineteen full-time judges, 38 part-time substitute judges, two full-time and five part-time administrative hearing examiners assist the Presiding Judge.

The Director and Chief Clerk of the Municipal Courts is responsible for the system's administrative and court clerical support functions. This office performs important record-keeping tasks, including the maintenance of records of all fines, fees, and court costs collected and disbursed to the state and the reporting of Court statistics.

The Municipal Courts operate out of the system's central location at 1400 Lubbock in downtown Houston and from satellite courts located at HPD's Southeast and Westside Command stations and at three other HPD substations in the Kingwood, Clear Lake and Acres Homes areas.

# Development and Infrastructure

Houston's large population and territory require the City of Houston to provide effective development and infrastructure services. These services are among the least glamorous but most important that any city can provide its citizens. Effective planning, safe water and wastewater systems, efficient programs for street and traffic signal maintenance and regular garbage collection are critical elements in the quality of life

## PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Department of Planning and Development has wide-ranging responsibilities related to Houston's growth and development and to fostering the well-being of Houston neighborhoods and communities. Those responsibilities include:

- Implementing and enforcing land use regulations that guide growth and development in the city;
- Providing planning support for neighborhoods and long-range planning for the city as a whole;
- Providing and analyzing demographic and mapping data to support city policy-making efforts regarding growth and development.

Planning and Development works closely with Houston's neighborhoods. Its "Super Neighborhood" initiative, begun in 2002, established a geographic framework of 88 "super" neighborhoods, using physical features such as bayous and freeways to identify communities that share common physical characteristics and infrastructure. The department supports in each community the organization and work of a super neighborhood council which undertakes the task of identifying and prioritizing the community's key concerns and needs and developing an action plan to address them. Planning and Development offers a variety of services that assist these councils in implementing their plans.

City of Houston annexation plans are another important concern of Planning and Development.

Houston residents experience. As Houston has become a city of national and international importance, aviation services have come to play an essential role. The City of Houston provides those and other development and infrastructure services through four departments: Planning and Development, Public Works and Engineering, Solid Waste Management and Aviation.

Operating within the boundaries of the state's Local Government Code, Houston has grown significantly since the late 1940's through the process of annexation. That code establishes for each city an extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ), territory immediately contiguous to the city's official boundaries and within which it has specific rights of governance. Houston's ETJ is essentially a five-mile band around the city's boundaries. Within that band, Houston has limited authority over property in the area and also the right to annex property following state law. Houston's most important annexations have occurred following guidelines established for the most common form of annexation, the so-called "general purpose annexation." Those guidelines place stringent public notification requirements on any city intending to annex territory. Any property considered for annexation must be included in a city's annexation plan at least three years prior to the actual annexation. They also require that any annexed property become part of the city's general purpose boundaries and be subject to all regulations, taxes and services provided by the city. Residents in the annexed territory become citizens of the city with all attendant rights and responsibilities.

For the years 2005 through 2007, the City of Houston does not plan to annex any territory for general purposes, although it would consider any request for annexation by specific property owners. In the event of any annexation, Planning and

*Within its five-mile extraterritorial jurisdiction, Houston has the right to annex property.*

### PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT *continued*

Development would play a key role in developing the city's annexation plan and providing demographic and mapping resources to support that plan.

The Director of the Department of Planning and Development is a member of the Houston Planning Commission, a 25-member board, includ-

ing citizens, appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council. The Commission reviews and approves subdivision and development plats and studies and makes recommendations to the City Council on planning and development issues involving Houston.

### PUBLIC WORKS AND ENGINEERING

**T**he Public Works and Engineering Department faces the task of delivering the basic services that make life possible in a city like Houston. Just a few statistics reveal the magnitude of that task in a given year: 145 billion gallons of water produced and distributed; 90,000 billion gallons of wastewater; maintenance of more than 16,000 lane miles of streets, 900,000 street name and traffic control signs and traffic signals at over 2,000 intersections and an operating budget of more than \$700 million. The department carries major responsibility for implementing the storm water, street, wastewater and water programs included in the City of Houston's five-year Capital Improvements Plans.

The Director of Public Works and Engineering

services, engineering services, and review and investigation of hazardous materials and other environmental problems;

- **Planning and Development Services:** carries responsibility for a variety of services related to utilities planning and the permitting/inspection process and City of Houston building code requirements;
- **Public Utilities:** provides drinking water to Houston residents and businesses, collects and treats wastewater throughout the city and participates in planning for future water supplies for the region;
- **Resource Management:** handles the reading and maintenance of water meters and billing and collection processes for utilities;
  - **Right-of-Way and Fleet Maintenance:** is responsible for maintaining city streets and bridges, drainage ditches and storm sewers and maintains the more than 5,100 vehicles used by the City of Houston;
  - **Traffic and Transportation:** provides engineering studies and investigations, repairs and maintains existing traffic signals and signs, installs new equipment, stripes city streets and works with Houston TransStar to provide computerized coordination of the city's traffic lights and signalized intersections.

*Public Works and Engineering each year produces and distributes 145 billion gallons of water and processes 90,000 billion gallons of wastewater.*

oversees the six divisions responsible for various aspects of the department's responsibilities. These divisions include:

- **Engineering and Construction:** provides design and construction services for infrastructure projects included in the City of Houston Capital Improvement Plans, including construction management and inspection

### SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

The Solid Waste Management Department (SWMD) collects nearly 70% of Houston's residential garbage. Each year, the department handles some 800,000 tons of solid waste and collects approximately 60,000 tons of recyclables. SWMD serves 375,000 Houston households. Its sponsorship program with civic associations allows them to negotiate with private garbage companies for garbage collection service for their neighborhoods with the city reimbursing them at a set rate per household.

SWMD operates four service centers located strategically in different parts of the city. Its collection fleet includes automated garbage trucks for residential garbage collection and a fleet of tractor-trailers and other trucks for heavy trash service. The department also operates three neighborhood heavy trash depositories, nine drop-off sites for recyclables and the Environmental Service Center where residents may drop off household hazardous wastes such as old paint, pesticides and solvents. Additionally, it is responsible for dead animal pickup.

### DEPARTMENT OF AVIATION

The City of Houston Department of Aviation manages the Houston Airport System (HAS) and its three facilities – George Bush Intercontinental Airport, William P. Hobby Airport, and Ellington Field. These airports cover some 15,300 acres and handle nearly every kind of aircraft from personal, business and military airplanes to the largest air cargo and passenger jets. The Houston Airport System is the fourth largest multi-airport system in the nation, the sixth largest in the world and the nation's seventh largest international passenger gateway.

The Department of Aviation's responsibilities have grown as Houston has become a major national and international aviation center. In 2004, Houston's airports handled 44.8 million passengers, including 6.4 million international passengers and 782 million pounds of airfreight. Houston has become one of the nation's most important air gateways to Latin America. In 2004, air traffic between Houston and Mexico alone

accounted for some 2.6 million passengers. Projections indicate that these numbers will significantly increase over the next decade.

The Department of Aviation is responsible for the initiation and management of HAS' capital improvement projects and for the day-to-day operation of the city's airports. An increasingly important function for the department has been the provision of effective security measures at each of the

*Houston has the fourth largest multi-airport system in the nation and the sixth largest in the world.*

three facilities. The department is an Enterprise Fund operation, supported entirely by its own revenues. HAS capital improvement projects are funded through airport revenue bonds.

# Human & Cultural Services

## HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Houston Public Library (HPL) supports the educational and cultural needs of Houston's population through its Central Library, located on McKinney Street in downtown Houston, and 36 branch libraries and special collections across Houston. HPL maintains an extensive research and circulating book collection, estimated at more than four million volumes, as well as collections of nontraditional materials such as audiobooks, ebooks, video tapes and DVD's. These collections are augmented through HPL's interlibrary loan services. Additionally, HPL serves as the core institution for the Houston Area Library Automated Network and Houston Area Libraries, computer networks that serve Houston and some 70 cities in the surrounding region.

HPL makes extensive use of computers and information technology. Its locations provide access

to its computer-based catalog as well as to the catalogs of the Rice University and University of Houston libraries, among others. Additionally, HPL locations offer access to the Internet and many of them provide introductory computer training.

HPL is also responsible for important specialized collections. Its Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research is one of the leading genealogical research centers in the nation. The Houston Metropolitan Research Center includes the Texas and Local History Department and maintains archives pertaining to the history of Houston businesses, civic organizations and religious institutions. It also contains extensive document collections relating to Houston's African-American and Hispanic-American heritage and a photographic collection of more than 3.5 million images.

## PARKS AND RECREATION

The Houston Parks and Recreation Department manages a diverse collection of parks, community centers and recreational facilities. With an operating budget of approximately \$47 million and more than 800 full-time employees, this department oversees:

- 337 developed parks and more than 200 open spaces totaling 18,652 acres;
- 56 community centers responsible for a wide array of educational and recreational programs including after school and summer youth programs, and leisure, sports and fitness programs for children, adults and seniors;
- 8 golf courses, including Memorial Park Golf Course, and a First-Tee Junior Golf Course at FM Law Park;
- 41 municipal swimming pools, three staffed tennis centers with an additional 78 tennis sites and more than 100 miles of nature and hike and bike trails;
- Houston Garden Center, the Japanese Garden, and Hermann Park's reflection pool complex.

The department is also responsible for ongoing maintenance of the parks and recreation system and cares for the city's urban forest. The department's urban foresters have begun Neighborhoods and Adopt-a-Tree programs to facilitate tree planting in Houston's neighborhoods.

The Parks and Recreation Department operates through four divisions: Recreation Operations, Grounds Maintenance, Facilities Development and Maintenance and Management and Finance.



*Houston Public Library Downtown Branch*

*The City  
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### HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

**E**stablished in 1989 to administer the Community Development Block Grant, a federal program designed to assist cities in neighborhood revitalization, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) now oversees that grant as well as four other major grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Using a combination of public and private resources, DHCD takes a multifaceted approach to the task of improving the living environment of Houston citizens of low to moderate income. Its major efforts include initiatives designed to address the following areas of concern:

- **Housing ownership and assistance:** programs to increase the supply of affordable housing, facilitate financing for new home owners of low to moderate income, provide funds for emergency home repair, provide assistance to agencies responsible for special needs housing, including housing for the disabled, the homeless and those with HIV/AIDS and assist residents in dealing with problems of housing discrimination;

- **Economic development:** programs that encourage investment in economically distressed areas through efforts such as its Small Business Development Corporation and One Stop Capital Shop;
- **Neighborhood improvement:** a variety of programs to improve the livability of low to moderate income neighborhoods through efforts ranging from anti-gang and juvenile delinquency prevention initiatives to day care programs, services for the elderly and funding for neighborhood infrastructure improvements.

DHCD is also involved in efforts to revitalize Houston's Enhanced Enterprise Community, a 20 square-mile area comprised of the city's business district and its oldest neighborhoods, and the American Dream Down Payment Initiative, a federal program designed to increase levels of home ownership among African-American and Hispanic-American families.

### CONVENTION AND ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES

**T**he Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department (CEFD) is responsible for city-owned properties that are the site of many of Houston's most important convention, cultural and entertainment activities. The department is responsible for the maintenance and operation of city property valued in excess of \$1 billion including 2,649,350 square feet of building space, 14.7 acres of plazas and other outdoor green space as well as extensive surface and underground parking facilities. CEFD properties include:

- **George R. Brown Convention Center** – one of the largest convention centers in the country, this facility contains 1.2 million square feet of flexible meeting and exhibit space and hosts some 300 tradeshow, conventions, corporate meetings and consumer shows each year;
- **Jones Hall** – presented to the City in 1966 by Houston Endowment in honor of Jesse H. Jones, this facility is home to the Houston Symphony

and the site of events presented by the Society for the Performing Arts;

- **Wortham Center** – funded entirely by private sector donations, this facility contains the 2300-seat Alice and George Brown Theater and the 1100-seat Roy and Lillie Cullen Theater and is home to the Houston Ballet and the Houston Grand Opera;
- **Miller Outdoor Theater** – a 1,582 seat outdoor theater located on eight acres in Hermann Park, this facility hosts over 180 free performances each year produced by a variety of arts organizations, including the Houston Symphony, the Houston Grand Opera, the Houston Ebony Opera Guild, Festival Chicano and Theatre Under the Stars.

CEFD is also responsible for such properties as Jones Plaza, Ray C. Fish Plaza, the Bush Monument and Sesquicentennial Park. The department also

*HPL's  
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the nation.*

### CONVENTION AND ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES *continued*

administers contracts between the City of Houston and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County and the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau as well as it leases for Bayou Place, the Aquarium and Lakewood Church (formerly Compaq Center).

CEFD has an operating budget of approximately \$75 million and 101 employees. Although its primary source of revenue is the city's hotel occupancy tax, the department also funds its activities from the revenues generated by its leasing activities and parking services.

### HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

**T**he Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS) has primary responsibility for the delivery of services that support the health and well-being of Houston residents. HDHHS oversees services that include HIV testing, immunization programs for children and adults, environmental and consumer health inspection and regulation and the management of the

city's numerous multi-service centers. The department's director manages the following divisions:

- **Communicable Disease Control** – provides AIDS/HIV counseling and testing, immunizations for infants, children and adults and examination, treatment and follow-up services for those with sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis;
- **Environmental Health Services** – oversees testing and educational programs dedicated to environmental health concerns as varied as air quality, lead-based paint hazard reduction, the city's smoking ordinance, water quality, Brownfields development and radiation control and, through its Bureau of Consumer Health Services, promotes food safety and the prevention of food-borne disease through regulation and inspection and through training and education programs;
- **Neighborhood Services** – manages the city's 14 health center and multi-service centers which provide preventive (prenatal, family planning and well-child) health services, child care, senior programs and space for appropriate service agencies and oversees the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program which provides supplemental nutrition and no-cost immunization to eligible women and children;
- **Administrative Support** – provides budget, purchasing, human resources, facilities and information system services that support the work of HDHHS and its three operating divisions.



*Houston City Hall and Reflection Pool*

# Special Governmental Authorities

## METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY

The Metropolitan Transit Authority (Metro) was created by public referendum in 1978 to meet the mobility needs of the Houston metropolitan area. Its jurisdiction includes the City of Houston and those surrounding areas whose citizens voted to be included. At present, the Metro Board consists of nine members, five appointed by the City of Houston, two by the Harris County

Commissioners Court and two by the mayors of the other fourteen incorporated cities within Metro's service area. Metro provides public transportation through its bus service and light rail, its traffic management services and infrastructure improvement programs. Its services are financed by user fares, a 1% sales tax and various federal and state grants.

## PORT OF HOUSTON AUTHORITY

The Port of Houston continues its historical role as one of the significant foundation's of Houston's economy. The Port is governed by the Port of Houston Authority which owns and operates the public facilities located on the Houston Ship Channel and is the ship channel's official sponsor. Those facilities include 43 general cargo wharves, two liquid cargo wharves, the Barbour's Cut container terminal and the proposed Bayport terminal. The governing body of the Port of Houston Authority is the Port of Houston Commission, composed of seven members. The City of Houston and the Harris County Commissioners Court each appoint two commissioners and jointly appoint the chairman of

the Port Commission. The Harris County Mayors & Councils Association and the city of Pasadena each appoint one commissioner. Management of the Port of Houston is the responsibility of its executive director and a managing director, each appointed by the Port Commission.



*Light Rail in the Houston Medical Center*



This handbook represents a part of the continuing effort of the League of Women Voters of the Houston Area to provide governmental information for citizens.

Names and contact information for City of Houston officials may be found in the Voters Key, published annually by the League of Women Voters.



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