

Introduction

Face it. We've had it with smoggy days, crowded roads and long commutes. It's time to rethink the way we manage existing assets, invest in new tools and encourage sustainable growth.

It's time to enhance local lifestyles, reduce traffic congestion and support more sustainable modes of transportation.

During the Envision Central Texas process, residents examined various scenarios, ranging from historical growth trends characterized by residential and commercial development that sprawls throughout the area, to more densely focused growth. Residents chose an Alternative Future that focuses growth in housing and businesses in areas already highly developed – in urban areas – to help create places in which people want to live, work and play. This Alternative Future also preserves natural areas that are especially beautiful and particularly sensitive. Now, the difficult questions center on **how to grow** the way Central Texans want -- “vibrant urban places that are residences for much of the population growth that is coming, but that also allow people to work, shop and play nearby.”

Some agencies have already taken steps toward this Alternative Future, and those steps are recognized in this white paper; but many of the decisions made today still use information and concepts based on segmented, isolated, interest-by-interest approaches.

Little progress has been made in developing a game plan for how this region can transition from current development trends to making more strategic growth and sustainable public investment decisions. The State of Texas offers few regulatory options to help guide growth and development, particularly as a region. Thus, the focus is on demanding more from some tools that exist today – the public investment in open spaces, roads, rail, utilities, and schools that currently support sprawling development and how we can use them – to focus growth in urbanized areas and discourage growth in the places we want to protect and preserve.

To make progress, *Connect the Dots* is designed to:

Goal 1: Create a dialogue about what is needed to accommodate the widely accepted levels of growth anticipated in the next 25 years and counter the cumulative effects of not promoting a specific public investment strategy.

Goal 2: Build a more detailed understanding and consent on how Central Texans want to grow.

Goal 3: Encourage elected officials to ask that planning by agencies and governmental entities address the challenges of using public investment to support Central Texans' growth priorities.

We may have over simplified complicated issues and topics in an attempt to present clearly the daunting challenges and opportunities for change. Change will never occur if we insist on keeping the issues “too complicated” for public discussion or allow difficulty to frighten us from considering alternative futures. Nor will change occur if we sit back and hope that someone else makes the effort. Thus, first and foremost, this document is a challenge to residents, elected officials and business leaders to engage in what our future will look like and a call to work together to protect our valued assets and promote desirable places to live, work and play.

Making progress to address our challenges is too important to be left to technicians. Your continued involvement is critical.

To Preserve Places and Protect Our Environment

Texas does not provide counties or regions with many regulatory tools to manage growth. Yet most of our revered places are currently outside metropolitan areas. These revered places also represent essential public interests. Protection of the Highland Lakes and Edwards Aquifer also protects access to water, which is quickly displacing energy sources as the limiting factor for growth. Likewise, reversing sprawling land use is not merely a fight for farmland and open space, since per capita energy consumption is much greater outside urban areas – this is also a push to address Central Texas’ carbon footprint, ground level ozone from ever longer commutes and more. Finally, the preservation of revered places such as Barton Creek, the Edwards Aquifer, the Blackland Prairie, the Highland Lakes and public parks is increasingly difficult as land prices escalate, new development pushes on their edges and family farms are bulldozed for new developments.

The Challenges:

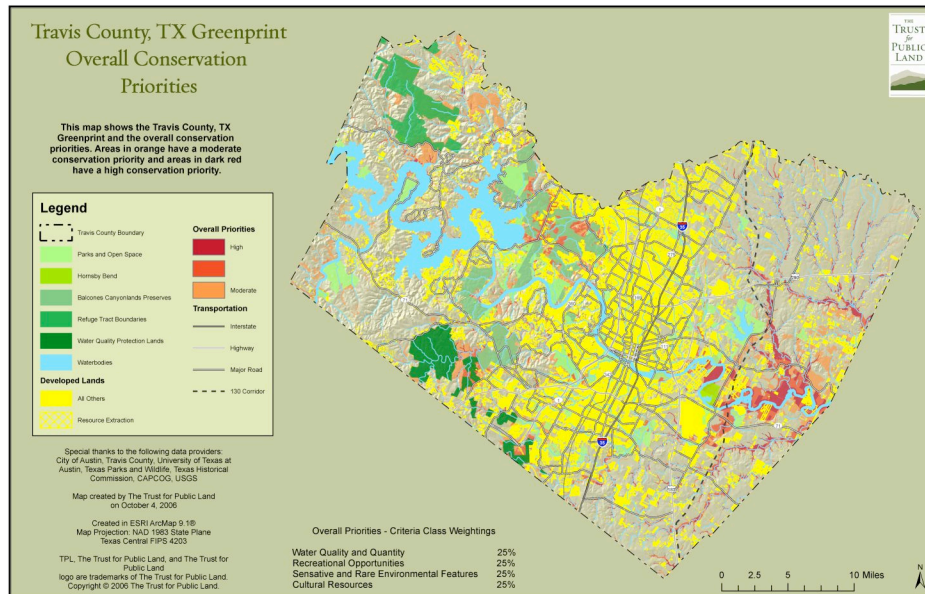
Between 1980 and 2000, the population of the three-county CAMPO region increased by 115 percent from 538,000 to 1,160,000. Much of the new population was accommodated in low-density single-family development on the fringes of the existing urban area. The job growth that accompanied this population increase occurred primarily in Travis County and southern Williamson County. The resulting challenges stem from unsustainably expensive and invasive sprawl growth patterns where development chases cheap land in largely unregulated and undeveloped areas. This eventually shifts most of the costs for schools, water, wastewater, utilities and transportation to the region’s urbanized areas via higher property taxes.

Facing the Challenges:

Central Texas and other high-growth urban regions in Texas have been seeking state legislative authority for county and regional planning and land-use management tools to address unsustainably expensive sprawl growth patterns¹; however, the State of Texas consistently resists most attempts to regulated land uses outside of those allowed within an urbanized boundary.

Just understanding the current status of land uses can help strategic planning of non-regulatory tools. Trust for Public Lands recently completed a *Greenprint* process (an example shown below) that layers Geographic Information Systems mapping for key land uses and resources to provide a sophisticated understanding of where land needs to be protected and is actually available to be protected.

Central Texas needs to extend *Greenprint* capabilities to other counties in the region and then develop a set of strategies for policies and public investments that can begin to protect the available high-value properties. The tactics can range from land conservation and acquisition to parkland maintenance to incentive-based tools that attract new development to preferred growth areas.



¹ See Appendix IV

To Promote Focused Growth by Creating Attractive Places

Metropolitan areas, such as Austin, Round Rock and San Marcos, have significant zoning and development authority within their city limits, as well as extra-territorial jurisdiction extending three to five miles beyond their city boundaries. Central Texans also can use incentive-based tools to attract growth in desirable areas.

The Challenges:

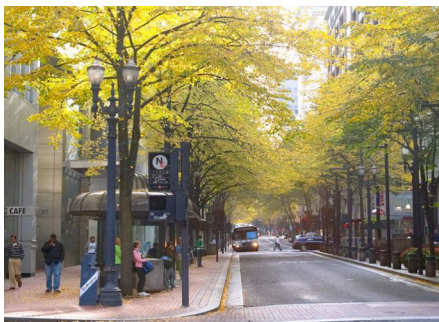
Many current development codes were developed based on the suburban single lot, single household growth pattern. Neighborhoods have grown up this way and many current residents are cautious about significant changes to their neighborhood. Simultaneously, current zoning practices have segregated businesses away from residences, so that it is easier to build strip shopping retail and office building clusters than to build traditional neighborhoods that give people a mix of activities and locations near where they live. This growth pattern, however, costs more in taxes than it generates. Thus growing attractive places not only appeals to an underserved market, as much as 30% of the residential and 40% of the commercial; but it also strengthens that economic engine that tax subsidizes the sprawling growth that is not going away anytime soon.

Facing the Challenges:

Land use and transportation regulations and policies should be rewritten to allow more focused development in urban areas. We need to work with neighborhoods to encourage appropriate levels of redevelopment and the growth of new businesses and retail; there is a market for these development options. This offers the possibility of increasing the tax base while relieving some of the pressures to escalate property taxes. And the growth of activity centers can conserve natural resources and maintain our air quality by minimizing the footprint of growth and encouraging the increased use of public transportation, walking and bicycling.

Central Texas' transportation planning agency (CAMPO) has launched efforts to transition toward the growth scenarios called for by most of the participants in Envision Central Texas, while balancing respect for existing local plans and values. The CAMPO 2035 Growth Concept proposes that local governments and other regional partners implement strategies that would encourage the development of activity centers, and a transportation system to serve them, throughout the region. Cities will need to sign agreements and institute changes in their development codes to support these activity centers.

In addition, the municipalities of Austin, Leander and Elgin have taken significant policy steps to promote transit-orient development around planned rail/transit stops. The City of Austin has a long-standing commitment to a neighborhood planning process that promotes more traditional neighborhood development, as well as commits significant funding to stimulate mixed-use and more focused growth in areas where such development is desirable. More needs to be done early and consistently to built consent from stakeholders.



Our own observations, and those of property market specialists, are that the most value accrues to the timeless places.

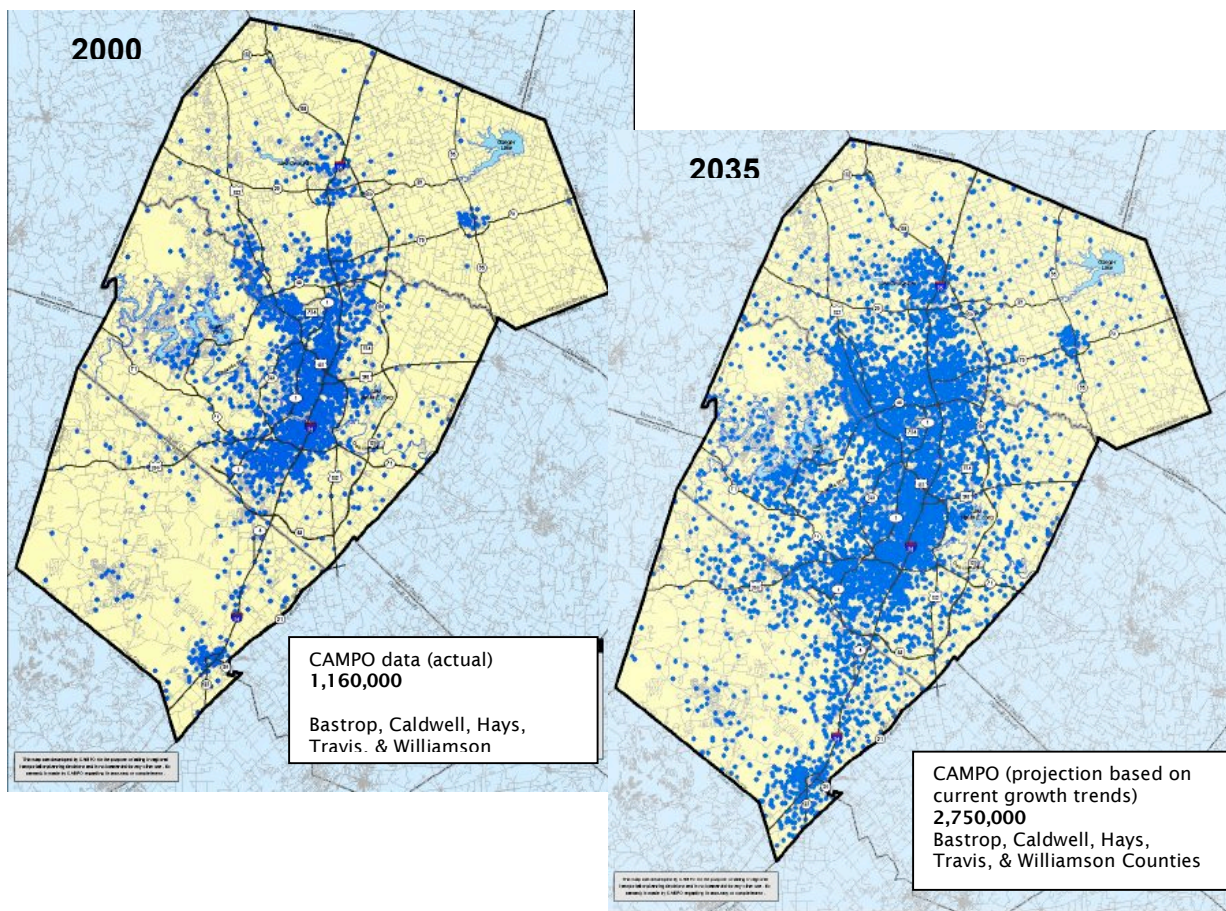
How?

Changing the Way We Make Public Investments

Historically, public investments have been functionally segregated. Transportation investments build a transportation system, water investments build a water supply system, and so on. This has created separate “silos” for funding, planning and implementation led and defended by staff with specialized “expertise” in one thing. Thus, transportation investments have only served transportation interests, water and waste water investments have only focused on supplying water services, and so on.

CAMPO forecasts a 137 percent increase in population from 2000 and 2035. The two maps below illustrate where all these new residents will locate based on current development patterns² and if growth occurs as depicted in the 2035 map, Central Texas will be hard press to afford the new transportation, utilities, schools, etc needed in this scenario. As importantly, the investments we have already made in the current transportation, utilities, and school systems will work less and less well.

We will discuss each area in more detail, but in general, the challenges are convincing the region’s agencies and entities to look beyond their specific interests, boundaries and authorizations to work on regional goals that are interrelated with other interests. For example, a city has an obligation to its residents with its authority restricted to its boundaries, and its money is usually spent only on those purposes. Yet, Central Texans are concerned that current development patterns are contributing to a decline of the overall quality of life in the region, with development of sensitive environmental areas and rural land, increasing public infrastructure costs, sharply climbing costs for the family budget, and other factors.



² See Appendix IV for more discussion on current growth patterns.

Transportation

Current growth patterns have consequences for transportation and vice versa. Most people drive to work, to shop, to worship and to play. So, as growth continues to sprawl, the distance for trips gets longer, more land is given up for parking, and streets or highways are more clogged, but there are no real mobility options.

Today, nine out of every ten Central Texans use an automobile as their primary source of transportation. Historically, automobile travel has been convenient, cheap, safe, comfortable and reliable. This is a perfect example of how successful public investment can be in promoting a transportation option, since nearly one in ten dollars of local, state and federal transportation funding has automatically been allocated to road projects over the past 60 years. This success, however, has created unintended consequence. The costs of new road projects and the maintenance of existing roads far exceeds available funding.

This trend is unaffordable and unsustainable. Public investment in transportation is unable to sustain demands for maintenance and operations, much less keep up with demands for new roads or additional transit services. Personal costs also are skyrocketing with the high prices of gasoline, insurance, and vehicles. Families now spend an average of \$7,200 per year on an average car/truck. Almost half of Central Texans pay more for transportation than for housing.

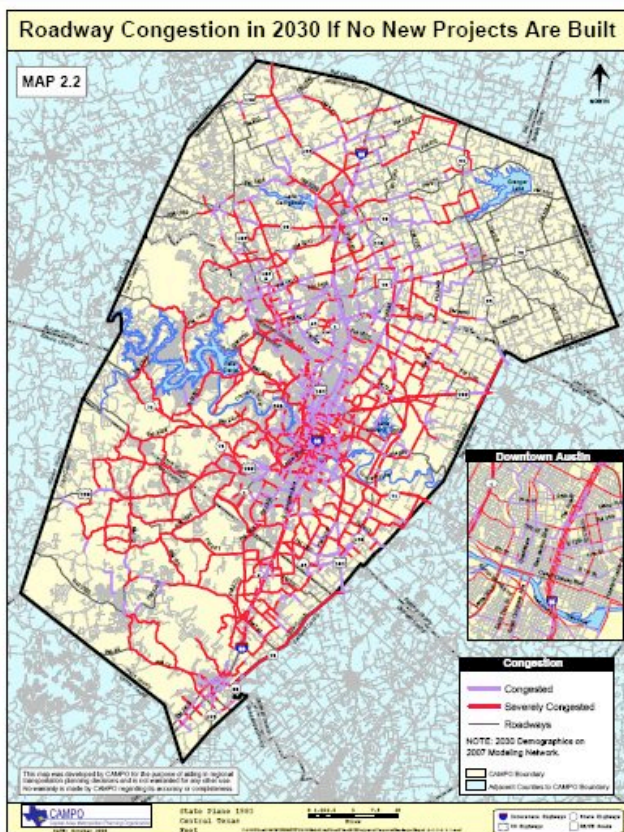
The Challenges for Roadways:

There are multiple agencies involved in providing public roadways, all with different roles, funding sources and authorizations. The timeline for projects from initial planning to construction is often so long that the elected officials and residents initially involved may radically change over time. Availability of funding is not keeping up with simple “supply the demand” strategies, and citizens

have not fully embraced funding alternatives such as tolling. Additionally, agencies have had mixed success in balancing competing needs or interests of those most impacted - users, potential users and adjacent residences.

Facing the Roadway Challenges:

Central Texans need to focus on cooperation among the agencies and entities involved in the planning, management, maintenance and construction to maximize roadway investments. This will require a regional approach based on consensus; the development of better planning and modeling tools that include multiple impact values; metrics for success that incorporate growth and quality of life factors; and more flexible use of available funding. This also will require using tools to manage demands on the road network such as HOV lanes, controlled access highways, congestion pricing, managed lanes and other automobile strategies new to Central Texas. Pricing travel to reflect market demands has the advantages of addressing demand and providing revenues that also can be used to create the robust options necessary for travelers to have viable travel choices.



Public Transportation

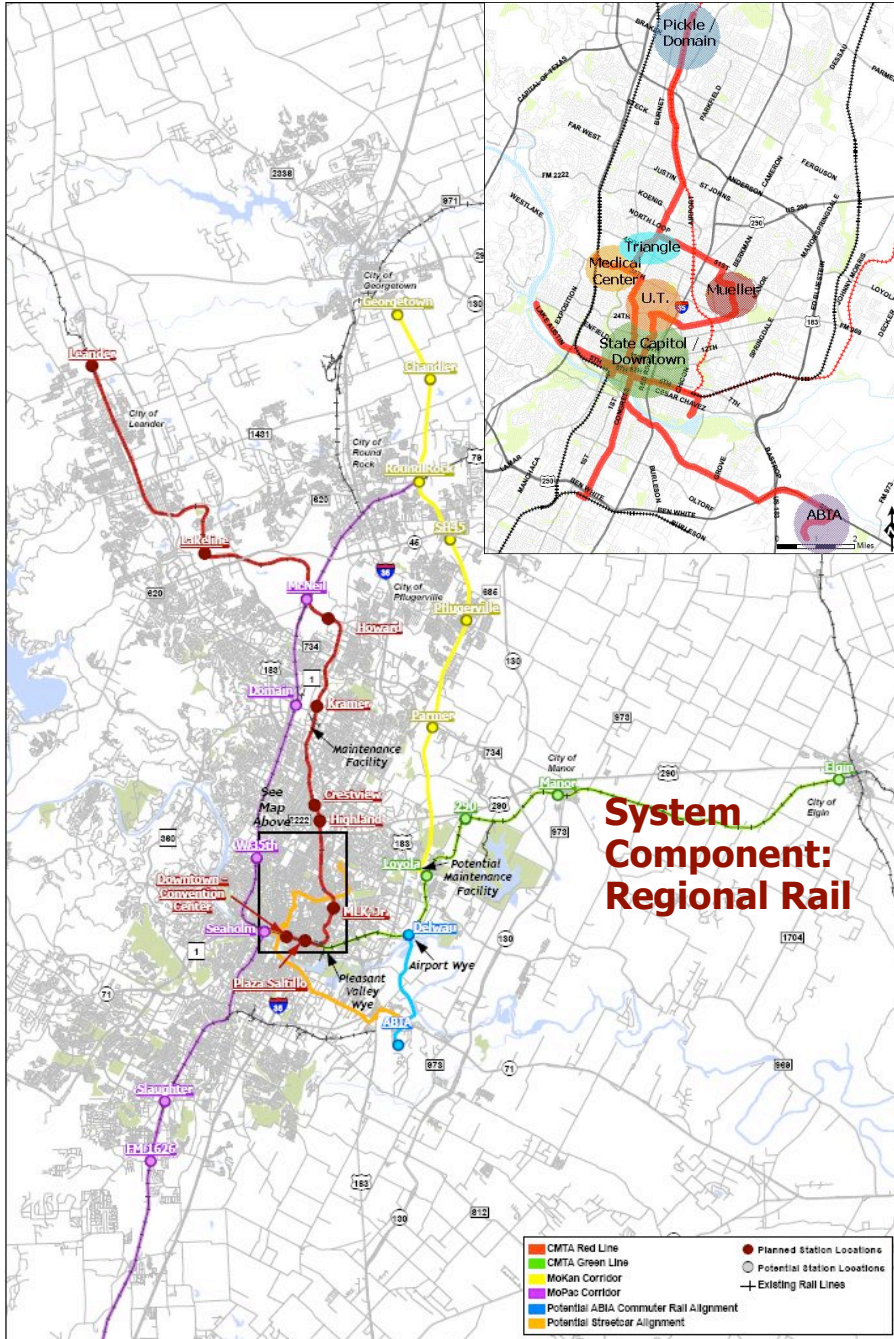
The Challenges for Public Transportation:

Public transportation is funded primarily by local taxes and depends on each city opting in and committing to one cent of its sales tax. Central Texas receives very little state and federal funding for public transportation, which creates a regional patchwork of services, competition for limited sales tax revenues and demands for equity among contributing cities. Finally, public transportation agencies have grown accustomed to being “second-class” participants in transportation decision-making, and perhaps have become too focused on their niche of operating an efficient bus service only.

Facing the Public Transportation Challenges:

Transit agencies need to become full partners in regional transportation planning, and other transportation entities need to become full partners in public transportation.

Rather than simply adding transit planning into the CAMPO plans, all agencies must begin more integrated planning to develop a transportation network that is regional, multimodal and robust in its ability to deliver reliable options. The transit agencies also must embrace reconnecting land use with transportation as an essential part of their mission, even if that requires increases in their capacity to plan, communicate, develop partnerships with other agencies and operate multiple types of services over a larger area.



Lastly, transit agencies must increase transparency in how they balance internal competing interests, e.g. services to maximize efficiency, commuter services, off-peak services, and services provided to people who are transit dependent, etc.

Thanks to LAN for the production of the regional map.

Capital and Utility Infrastructure

Texas State statutes allow the use of public investments in utilities to promote new development outside of metropolitan boundaries, either through a city extension of utility services under an annexation agreement or through the creation of a utility district that will eventually be paid for through public financing. This is Texas' primary mechanism for growth management in counties and it affects land use and public-utility investment decisions.

The Challenges:

With water alone, Central Texas has three river authorities, and each municipality in the region manages its own water/waste water utilities. Also, there are numerous utility districts. They all make decisions independent of one another. Unfortunately, the status quo has been reactive and facilitated sprawling development into once rural areas in pursuit of cheap land and development costs that end up getting passed along to tax payers.

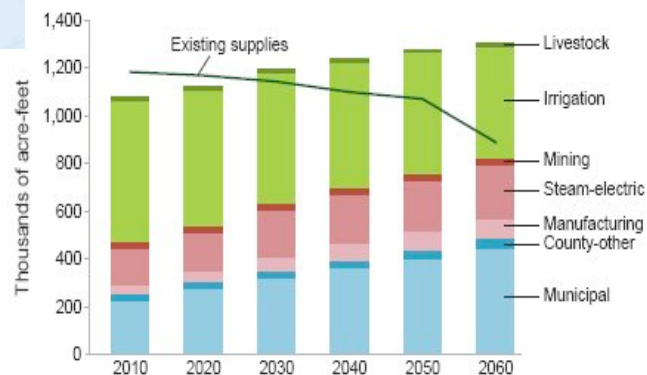
Once the unincorporated areas are developed at low densities, quality infill development will be more difficult and costly to achieve over the next 25 to 50 years. It is generally less expensive to service growth and development that is concentrated and compact versus growth and development that is spread out over a large area. Annexation is a process that helps a city continue to physically grow and remain financially healthy as expansion occurs; yet, annexing sprawl can often make urban growth more difficult and ultimately unsustainable.

Facing the Challenges:

The challenge will be to develop a regional planning process that allows the utility providers to sell their products efficiently while also promoting new growth patterns. There is no indication that any public agency is developing a regional plan of water/waste water, electricity, pipelines or other utilities that could have a significant impact on land use. Such planning could, however, serve as an important tool in growth management even with the current market-oriented approach to providing services. The first necessary step will be to develop an understanding of what is in place and what is planned by all of the entities involved.



Figure K.3. Projected total water demand and existing water supplies for 2010-2060.



Schools – Siting of Essential Public Facilities

The decision of where to locate new schools and other educational facilities can influence growth of neighborhoods, communities, cities, even regions. The quality of schools is a primary factor in where families choose to live, particularly households with younger children.

The Challenges:

There are 77 school districts in Central Texas and they all have their own jurisdictional boundaries, elected governing body and taxing authority.

Planning school locations is a function of the individual school districts, with no requirement of coordination among other local governmental planning departments. It also has historically been in response to the current growth pattern of suburban sprawl.

The primary concern for selecting prospective school sites has, in the last 20–30 years, become convenience of the parental drop-off and pick-up before and after school. This makes proximity to larger streets with higher speeds the single most important site consideration to school planners. The result is schools (especially elementary schools) are no longer located in the center of neighborhoods where children could walk or ride their bikes safely on low-speed streets to and from school.



Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland

An elementary school is close enough so that most children can walk from their home.

the

Facing the Challenges:

Greater collaboration among school-district planners and city and regional-growth-planners could promote choosing new school locations that promote a community desired growth pattern.³

Schools located in activity centers could adopt a new “urban” form of school campus, common in high-density cities like New York and Boston (that don’t require the expansive acreage common in suburban school developments). Returning elementary schools to their traditional role as a neighborhood center can serve as a magnet to attract families back to the urban setting and to achieve a richer, more diverse social network. Middle schools and especially high schools also could become important components of activity centers – allowing students to use mass transit to and from school and contributing to the vitality of the centers.



Portland State University – a route streetcar runs through the middle of campus

Similarly, the public investment in and location of community colleges, colleges and universities could be important tools in achieving desired urban growth. Locating higher-education campuses along mass transit lines allows easier access to those institutions by students, faculty and staff; while easing the parking crunch so prevalent at most campuses today. In addition, employees and students from higher education institutions add greatly to the vitality and diversity of activity centers.

³ National standard for campus size – CNU report.

Conclusion

Empowering Central Texans to face challenges that are too important to be left to technicians. Your continued involvement is critical.

We, the contributors, began meeting to determine if we could agree on how to talk about the complex issues facing Central Texas if we are to truly shift how it grows. This white paper started as a way to document our own discussions and progress. We recognize that dialogue needs to occur in the broader public arena where success or failure depends on accomplishing what people want and will use. Protecting or enhancing our local lifestyle is too important to leave to planners and engineers and policy wonks alone.

The Alliance for Public Transportation and other contributors to this document are interested in hearing what your thoughts on how to improve this presentation, the substantive issues we raise, and particularly what role you want to play in this issue.

To begin this process, we have provided a quick and easy survey. At the end of the survey we also have a few questions specific to public transportation because understanding your opinions on that issue will help us better understand what to advocate for in the future. Please visit our [survey](#) and let us know what you think.

We are creating a speakers bureau and would be happy to speak with your group or organization in more detail about these issues. To schedule a presentation write: transitalliance@gmail.com

We will share your input with appropriate elected officials.