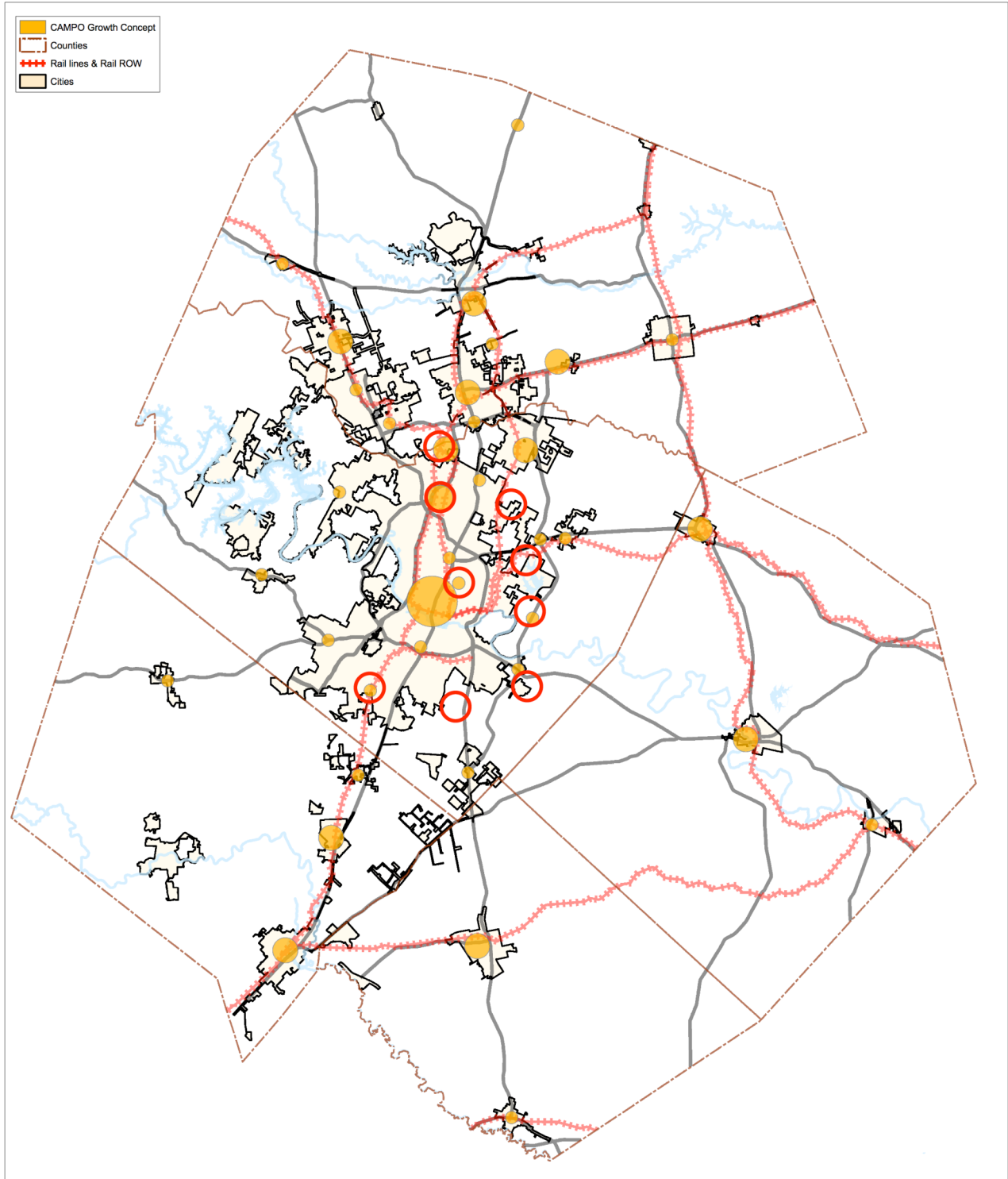


# Connect the Dots

Challenging Central Texas to Invest Strategically by Reconnecting Growth and Public Investments



# Contributors

One of the Alliance for Public Transportation's priority activities is to work for a regional transportation vision that has widespread support. We quickly discovered that other individuals and organizations are interested or already working on related projects and began meeting to collaborate on the complex issues facing Central Texas. This white paper started as a way to document our own discussions and progress.

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We recognize that the real conversation and debate need 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, engineers and policy wonks alone. It is our sincere hope that this white paper evolves as others decide to contribute substantive observations about current conditions and suggest new strategies that we have not even thought about. In the meantime, the intent is to provide a provocative challenge for elected officials, business leaders and agency staff, as well as a resource for those who may wish to seize the many opportunities that are available; making progress toward an alternative, more sustainable future for Central Texas.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction and Goals</b>	<b>page 1</b>
-------------------------------	---------------

## **Why?**

- **To Create an Alternative Future** **page 2**
- **To Preserve Special Places and Protect Our Environment** **page 3**
- **To Promote Focused Growth by Creating Attractive Places.....** **Page 4**

## **How?**

- **Changing the Way We Make Public Investments** **page 5**
- **Transportation** **page 6**
- **Public Transportation** **page 7**
- **Utility Infrastructure** **page 8**
- **Selecting Sites for Schools, Colleges, and Universities** **page 9**

## **Conclusion**

- **Empowering Central Texans** **page 10**

## **Appendices**

- A. Statement of Principles** **page 11**
- B. Places to Grow – Activity Centers** **page 12**
- C. Envisioning a Regional Network of Rail and High Capacity Transit** **page 13**
- D. Challenges of Urban Sprawl Growth Patterns** **page 17**
- E. Central Texas Transportation Entities** **page 21**

# Executive Summary

## Challenging Central Texas to Invest Strategically

### *Reconnecting Growth and Public Investments*

Currently, Central Texas is not prepared to face the growth challenges of the next three decades. Systemic gaps need to be closed if residents, current and future, are to address these challenges and realize the opportunities and benefits of regional growth.

The purpose of this white paper is to engaging residents, elected officials and business and community leaders in a necessary public dialogue about current growth trends and making public investments that promote attractive, sustainable and dynamic places for people to work, live and play.

### **Why?**

**To Create an Alternative Future** – People are concerned about the prospect of 1.25 million more people living here. They are receptive to a vision that offers a positive alternative to our current sprawling growth – one that respects private property rights and community values, and that offers creative solutions, working within laws, land-use plans and market forces. Residents have voiced a desire for more choices in their lives – in transportation (a mix of roads and transit), housing (type, affordability and location) and opportunities (education, interests and jobs). The decision making process on public investments will need to be a more transparent, outcome oriented, and comprehensive process going forward.

**To Preserve Places and Protect Our Environment** – More focused growth in already developed areas will guide growth away from environmentally sensitive areas. Central Texas is attractive because of the unique natural beauty of the Hill Country, lakes and diverse habitats. The first step in protecting these valued natural resources is to identify areas that are available and important for the preservation of habitat, water quality or other environmental and recreational priorities. Then, with better coordination and cooperation among agencies, public investment can facilitate residential and commercial development into areas where development already exists – our urban areas – and level the playing field to discourage growth in the most sensitive parts of our region.

**To Focus Growth by Creating Attractive Places** – Consistently, people find the most attractive places are designed to a human scale, have many options, and offer the vibrancy of human interactions. As much as 30 percent of the current real estate residential market would choose denser urban, mixed-use residential options. Retail and commercial spaces thrive when surrounded by other destination businesses, especially as more urban spaces are built and become available. In addition, employers find urban locations more vibrant and attractive to employees. Building robust urban areas is the most efficient way to provide services at the least public cost. Great urban places are created by design and intent to foster social intercourse.

Currently, urban development that is mixed use and pedestrian friendly must work around regulatory, lending and development practices that have evolved over the past five decades. Policies must be changed to make this kind of development as easy to accomplish as any other type. The transportation system must, at a minimum, evolve to promote mobility options as well as streets and public places that are vibrant. And, transportation investments – along with other major public investments like utilities, schools – can be used to attract quality urban development by reducing the risk of major redevelopment and new development alike.

## How?

### Transportation Investments

Nine out of every ten Central Texans drive alone as their primary transportation option. Historically, automobile travel has been convenient, cheap, safe, comfortable and reliable. However, as a result, auto travel has facilitated sprawling development that generates too much travel for roads and too few opportunities for high-capacity public transportation to work well. Trying to build and manage a road system to accommodate all this travel is far exceeding available funding.

Investing in transportation demand management (e.g., HOV lanes, controlled access highways, congestion pricing, managed lanes, alternative travel options and support for sustainable development) is 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 choices for a trip.

Investing in alternative options produces a more robust transportation system that also can focus growth at access points – stations. For example, Central Texas is fortunate to have an existing network of rail lines between many of our cities that could help connect the region without having to buy rights-of-way in already congested, highly developed corridors. Building this passenger rail network also can stimulate transit-oriented development (TOD), increasing focused growth and economic development by locating places to live, work, shop and play around stations and stops where it is most efficient to provide large numbers of people with a quick and convenient travel option, especially during “rush hours.”

### Capital Improvements and Utility Infrastructure

It is generally less expensive to offer utilities and infrastructure to growth and development that is concentrated and compact. Services in Downtown Austin, for example, cost 30 cents for each tax dollar generated, while it can cost as more than is raised by property and sales taxes in suburban areas and smaller towns. The challenge will be in developing a regional planning process that retains and works with the market orientation of our utility providers.

### Schools – Siting of Essential Public Facilities

Siting public facilities influences new growth and development patterns. The current approaches force most public capital investments away from already urbanized areas – that is, to build completely new facilities in or near completely new developments.

There are 77 school districts in Central Texas, each with its own jurisdictional boundary, elected governing body and taxing authority. Planning future school locations is a function of the individual school districts, with no requirement of coordination among other local governmental planning departments. Historically, it also has been in response to the current growth pattern of urban sprawl.

Greater collaboration among school-district planners and city and regional growth-planners could offer the choice of new school locations to promote desired growth. 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.

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 would allow 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 could add greatly to the vitality and diversity of activity centers.

## Summary

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

- 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.

The Alliance for Public Transportation and other contributors to this document are interested in hearing your thoughts on these issues. Please visit our [survey](#) to let us know what you think.