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## Planners, developers foresee future for Houston

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As geographically massive as it is complex, Houston and its growth are frequently the topic of conversation among its residents.

"Houston is a multinucleus city that has allowed sprawl to generate around those centers," writes one Internet blogger.

"Ironic that all the growth in Houston is occurring in the most zoned parts of the city -- the master-planned communities," writes another.

But topics such as Houston's lack of zoning have also drawn praise to the city for shielding it from the housing crisis and strengthening the local economy.

"It's an absolute plus," says Ed Wulfe, founder and managing principal of Wulfe & Co. "We've been able to respond to economic opportunities and also to retain a strong quality of life through deed restrictions."

Wulfe, with more than 40 years experience in developing, restoring and renovating commercial properties, sees Houston becoming a much more densely packed city and stresses that planners and developers must take on the difficult task of envisioning their city as it will look 10 or 20 years from today.

"We have to try to envision the city that we want to be," he says. "Mobility is a big issue. We have to be sensitive to the needs of pedestrians and of the communities that exist now."

Like other U.S. cities, many Houston-area developers are turning to a concept known as "new urbanism," which embraces a pedestrian-friendly mix of retail, residential and community facilities within neighborhoods.

"New urbanism is actually old urbanism reborn," says Patricia Knudson Joiner, CEO of Houston-based urban planning company Knudson & Associates LP and former city planner for Houston. "In the 1930s and '40s, you had a standard of a grid system of tree-lined neighborhood streets interconnected with larger thoroughfares. Streets were mostly straight, instead of curvilinear. You had churches, schools and corner stores within walking distance of users. And then came the '50s and people had mobility. They had the automobile."

One bonus with this type of "old-fashioned" community, besides being pedestrian-friendly, is that most of the traffic burden is spread out among a grid system of larger thoroughfares rather than all emptying into one (often clogged) artery.

"I take exception to people saying Houston had no transportation plan," Joiner says. "There has been a major thoroughfare plan in place since 1941."

Transportation and urban planning have a more symbiotic relationship than most people realize. Joiner points out an example with the slow decline of visitors to the once thriving Gulfgate Shopping Center during the 1980s, combined with a slow but steady decline in the quality of apartments and in vacancy rates. Before



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Patricia Knudson Joiner, CEO of Houston-based urban planning company Knudson & Associates and former city planner for Houston: 'Planning is about seeing the future today and deciding if you like it or not.'

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the mall underwent redevelopment by Wulfe in 2001, it was discovered that nearby freeway access had changed during a road project, and transportation planners had inadvertently affected the Gulfgate area by causing would-be shoppers to take an easier to access exit down the road. And blight, she says, is like water on a glass table.

"It doesn't just sit in one spot," she says, "It doesn't just stay in that one puddle. It tends to spread and affect the areas around it."

Monitoring blight is the best way to prevent it, but since it is a slow and sneaky process, blight is not always easy to spot.

"It takes a whole lot more money to bring an area up than it does to keep it level," she says.

### **Community-friendly design**

Houston has become somewhat of a conversation piece for urban planners who visit the city to study how, with no zoning laws, the city evolved as it did.

"We have the equivalent of five downtowns," Joiner says. "Everybody wants to know how we have so many market centers. We have the Medical Center, the Energy Corridor, the Galleria area. Others are looking at Houston to see how the city has these centers instead of everyone driving to one downtown."

But there are problems as well, such as transportation. In addition to gridlock, commuters are stuck paying higher gasoline costs because other transportation options, such as walking and cycling, are limited in a sprawling city where a car (and an air-conditioned one at that) is considered a basic human need. A well-designed community within such a city, however, would present better options not only by creating a friendly path for walkers but by placing destinations closer together.

A "community-friendly design," Joiner says, means the corner store is at the corner. Schools, churches and other destinations are located within communities. In some cases, such as mixed-use developments, offices and restaurants are located just steps away from residential housing.

The increasingly popular mixed-use development is the basis for new developments that are springing up all over the country, including Houston, through projects such as Wulfe's BLVD Place at Post Oak Boulevard and San Felipe.

"This project is going to take Post Oak to the next level, for the next generation," Wulfe says.

It is one of many such projects that will feature the return of the tried and true grid street system.

"It allows for better traffic flow and better walkability," he adds.

### **Breaking the car habit**

"Pedestrian-friendly" means not only more sidewalks, but wider ones, more green space, shaded areas, park benches and access to communities through pedestrian bridges. These needs are being addressed by planners in a city that, for a time, did not require developers to build sidewalks.

With its hot summers and ceaseless square miles of space, Houston is not known as a walker's paradise.

"It's hard for people to get their heads around the size," Joiner says. "If you look on a map, there are about 10 different cities that will fit inside Loop 610. We're complex because we are so large geographically, but we are also a young city and we haven't used all the tools in our toolbox yet."

The solution to traffic congestion and a bad reputation with pedestrians is, it seems, multifaceted: Create more room to walk and a reason to keep people closer to home.

"A mixed-use center is the newer version of the mall, except you don't have to drive there and park your car because you can live and work there as well," says Michael Lebovitz, senior vice president and chief

development officer of CBL & Associates Properties Inc., which will open a mixed-use project in Pearland next month.

Chattanooga, Tenn.-based CBL & Associates Properties picked up quickly on the growing popularity of the "lifestyle center" concept and is working on several such projects, although Pearland Town Center will be the company's first "truly mixed-use" featuring residential, office, hotel and retail.

"Ours is not so much new urbanism it is new suburbanism," says Lebovitz, whose company is traditionally a suburban developer. "This project brings together all the aspects of a mall with an added residential component. There is much more of a town center feel."

The outcome of such projects on an overall mobility standpoint may not be immediately apparent, Joiner says.

"Planning is about seeing the future today and deciding if you like it or not," she says. "If you don't like what you see, whether it's potential blight, lack of parkland or transportation, those planning issues have a very long lead time. You see what policies you can change today to make a difference down the road."

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