



QUESTIONS FOR 2009 HOUSTON MUNICIPAL CANDIDATES

The Citizens' Transportation Coalition (CTC) is an all-volunteer grassroots transportation advocacy organization. Formed in 2004, we are interested in transportation planning issues and opportunities across the 8-county Houston region. CTC reaches more than 10,000 readers, many of whom live within the City of Houston. If elected, you will directly influence transportation policy in our city, and our readers are very interested in your views on several topics!

We would appreciate your responses by midnight Friday, September 25, 2009.

However, we will post all responses as they come in. Questions and answers will be posted on CTC's website at www.ctchouston.org and shared via our email list. If we do not hear back from you, we will list your answer as "No response."

You can get your answers to us in either of two ways:

BEST: By EMAIL	OK: By Fax
<p>Save this Word document to your computer, and be sure to include your name in the file name.</p> <p>Open the document in Word and type your answers in the boxes provided. (Boxes will expand as needed.)</p> <p>Save the file when you're finished.</p> <p>Email your completed questionnaire to candidates@ctchouston.org.</p>	<p>Print this document.</p> <p>Write or type your answers to each question in the boxes provided.</p> <p>Fax your completed questionnaire to (713) 529-1392.</p> <p>Please call Ian at (713) 576-9574 to report that the fax has been sent. Thanks!</p>

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Candidate name:

Carlos A. Obando

Position sought:

Houston City Council, At-Large Position #5

1. General

The Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) is a federally-required planning document. While cities like Atlanta, Denver, and Portland have made "improving quality of life" a top priority in their regional plans, Houston's 2025 RTP named "reducing traffic congestion" as the top goal.

Q1a: What should be the City's top priority in regional transportation planning?

Houston's regional transportation structure should be carried-out in a logical manner that allows for easy, quick and reliable commuting from the places where people live in the

Greater Houston area to the places they work.

Q1b: If elected, what would be your most important initiative(s) to address this priority?

As City Councilman representing the whole population of Houston, I would make sure that the City and the surrounding regions have a full plan to present to the public, demonstrating how the commuter transportation system would benefit the greatest number of Houstonians. In this regard, I would ensure that the phases of construction would be clearly delineated, so that the public would understand the greater transportation plan.

2. More transportation alternatives

One in five adult Texans cannot or does not drive. According to the 2009 Houston Area Survey, 62.4% of respondents said it is "very important" to the future success of Houston to develop a much-improved mass transit system.

Q2a: Do you support more transit for the Houston region?

I support a logical, reliable commuter transportation system in the Greater Houston region.

Q2b: What should the City do to enhance the usefulness of the developing light rail system?

As stated above, I believe that the light rail system must be paired with a commuter train system from the outer areas – Katy, Sugar Land and Ft. Bend County, Pearland, Galveston, Kingwood and other areas – so as to increase the usage of the light rail system. This system must run reliably on schedule. Once commuters experience the ease and convenience of using the mass transit system, they will continue to utilize it and be ambassadors for its use.

Nationally, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requires that new rail projects demonstrate how station development will support ridership. METRO's ability to win federal rail funding may therefore hinge on City of Houston planning regulations, but those regulations require suburban-style auto-dependent development with 25-foot setbacks on most major roadways. The new urban corridor development ordinance allows for reduced setbacks along specified roadways, but building pedestrian-friendly development elsewhere requires navigating a cumbersome variance process.

Q2c: Should the City legalize urban, pedestrian-friendly development along all roadways?

As with other aspects of our City's laws and ordinances, Houston should seek to streamline and make more efficient and responsive any development and permitting processes. Thus, permitting and variance processes should initially include the appropriate impact studies on the interested neighborhoods and businesses in the contiguous and nearby areas. While broad-based legalization of urban areas would seem to be a pro-active policy, recent development projects have demonstrated that each area must be evaluated and analyzed

according to its plan, impact and contingencies in order to minimize the instances of unintended consequences.

Houstonians fund transit with a \$.01 sales tax. In 1992, Bob Lanier diverted ¼ of our transit tax collections to the General Mobility program. This money is shifted to local jurisdictions within the METRO service area to fund road improvements across the region. In fiscal 2008, more than \$130 million of METRO's transit tax collections was allocated to the General Mobility fund, and \$94.7 million was claimed by the City of Houston. Since 1992, more than \$1.6 billion has been diverted from transit, funds which may have lost us more than \$1 billion in federal matching dollars. An additional \$1 billion will be diverted from transit to General Mobility projects between now and September 2014, when the current agreement ends.

Q2d: Do you support ending the diversion of our transit tax dollars to the General Mobility program when the current agreement expires in 2014?

The City Council must do what is in the best interests of the City in an overall manner. The Council should require a pro-active evaluation of the impact of General Mobility program, including what has been done with the money and whether it attracted monies to other areas of City finances. If the analysis finds that the overall impact of this program has been a \$1 billion loss over the whole budget, then logic would dictate that it not be renewed.

3. *Balancing interests within the transportation system*

Mobility is multi-modal. The City's public right-of-way includes roadways, utilities, sidewalks, and street trees, from property line to property line. This right-of-way must serve trucks, cars, buses, bicycles, pedestrians, wheelchairs, scooters, and transit users. Reconstruction of a single highway overpass or intersection can affect access for all of these uses.

Q3a: Should the City require every transportation infrastructure project within the City of Houston – regardless of the implementing agency – to preserve and/or enhance the full spectrum of mobility uses, including auto, pedestrian, bicycle, and transit access?

These questions should not be addressed based upon the implementing agency, but a standard set of criteria and requirements should be established and maintained for the benefit of the city. Should there be competing needs and interests, a process to address and resolve that discrepancy should be created. In other words, we should not favor one agency over another, but should look at the intrinsic value of the project itself.

Q3b: Should the City fund the construction and maintenance of sidewalks?

This is both a quality of life issue as well as a budgetary issue, and the decision to do so or not should not be made in a vacuum. The City should work with all concerned entities – including the county and neighborhood associations – to plan, construct and maintain sidewalks.

4. Regional transportation planning

Three million new people are projected to arrive in the Houston area over the next 30 years. Where they live and work, and how they get around, will have a tremendous impact on quality of life in Houston communities.

As the population increases, so does demand for goods and freight. How freight moves in and through our region will also affect quality of life. Further, Houston's economy is tied to the port and the efficient movement of goods through our region.

Truck traffic is a significant cause of roadway congestion, and freight rail is a more efficient, more environmentally-friendly alternative. However, Houston's freight rail system is at capacity and often disrupts neighborhoods because of its antiquated facilities.

Q4a: Do you support public investment in improving the freight rail system? What role should the city play in this?

The City should include freight rail in its consideration of regional transportation and infrastructure planning, however, we must be careful to not create unrealistic restrictions that hamper the free flow of goods and services.

Commercial airline travel uses at least six times more energy than intercity passenger rail for trips of fewer than 600 miles. Experience across the world has shown that passengers prefer high speed rail to airplanes on trips of 2-3 hours, which is possible between Houston, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. Recently the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) initiated a national High Speed Rail program which includes federal grant funds. Houston could potentially connect to New Orleans via the Gulf Coast Corridor and to Dallas/Ft. Worth, Austin, and San Antonio via the Texas T-Bone.

Q4b: Do you believe it's important to develop high-quality rail connections for passengers between Houston and other major Texas cities?

High-speed rail connections between Houston and other major cities might make sense, however they need to be integrated with other infrastructure. For instance, commuter trains to and from San Francisco link up to other forms of mass transportation in order to facilitate movement of people once they reach their destination city. If they are stand-alone projects then they will only be expenditures that do not meet the desired goals.

Achieving the highest efficiencies of rail transportation requires careful planning. Intercity rail service requires long, uninterrupted rights-of-way. Additionally, commuter rail requires seamless connections to job centers, which in turn requires connections to light rail and local bus as well as convenient station locations.

Q4c: Should the City of Houston participate in identifying and developing appropriate corridors and station sites that will connect regional and statewide transit to urban employment centers?

As part of the overall transportation planning process, the City should seek to identify the maximum number of corridors and station sites connecting regional and statewide transit to the Houston employment centers. However, these locations should be appropriate to the

internal transportation plan that the City develops.

In the Houston region there are more than 1,200 at-grade intersections of rail lines and roadways. These at-grade crossings inflict both economic and social costs on Houston, including surface congestion, neighborhood disruption, delayed emergency response, and crashes. Grade separations resolve these issues. In addition, grade separations are essential to enable high-speed rail.

Q4d: Should the City of Houston dedicate significant ongoing funds to invest in grade separations?

One of the primary functions of a city is to ensure the safety of its citizens – this includes facilitating quick emergency responses. If these intersections hamper this effort, or create congestion that hampers the speed and efficiency of these responses, the City must identify and implement the best solutions to alleviate these delays.

The proposed Grand Parkway, a 180-mile loop toll road, would run through mostly uninhabited and undeveloped areas in nearby unincorporated Harris County. Its construction will spur development on the Katy Prairie which will result in the loss of valuable greenspace and wildlife habitat as well as increased flooding in existing Houston neighborhoods. Ironically, the Grand Parkway will also increase traffic congestion on other Houston area roadways because projected employment along the corridor is minimal and all new residents will thus have to commute long distances to their workplaces.

Q4e: Should the City of Houston take a position regarding whether to construct projects such as the Grand Parkway that stand to impact the City but that lie outside its jurisdiction?

The City of Houston should be involved in the conversations and planning of any projects that might impact the City (directly or tangentially).

Across the Houston region, there are more than 40 public agencies building transportation projects. This work is coordinated to some extent by the Transportation Policy Council (TPC), which has responsibility for allocating federal transportation dollars to local governments. While many of these projects affect City of Houston residents and the City appoints 3 members to the TPC, the City has not historically played a strong role or used its voice to influence regional transportation planning.

Q4f: Should the City play a more active role in regional transportation planning? How?

One of the valuable aspects of Houston's community awareness is the ability of smaller entities to benefit from their proximity to the nation's 4th largest city, but not to have their policies dictated by that city. The camaraderie between the larger and smaller entities is a unique balance that should be understood, strengthened and continued. The Transportation Policy Council is an appropriate venue to facilitate planning and discussions about the Greater Houston Region's transportation issues – and to give all of the entities concerned a voice in this process. The City of Houston's involvement is beneficial, as is the input that the City gets from others on that body.

5. City of Houston organization and process

As Houston has grown, private development has generally followed public investment in infrastructure. The City's decisions regarding where to improve public infrastructure result in de-facto planning for our future growth. The City in turn depends on property taxes from private development for revenue and thereby stands to benefit from strong growth.

Q5a: Should the City strategically plan infrastructure investments to influence the city's growth?

Unlike other cities around the United States, Houston does not have restrictive zoning or development regulations, which allows it to grow in unexpected and beneficial ways. Nevertheless, strategically planned infrastructure investment can ease the city's growth and can encourage additional business investment and revenue in Houston, and thus should be continued.

Our city must live with the infrastructure choices we make today for generations to come. Some options create or relieve social impacts that are difficult to quantify. However, the best long-term solution often costs more in dollars to confer neighborhood benefits. For example, consider the trade-offs between depressed and elevated structures. An overpass limits access to property and subjects the neighborhood to noise and visual impacts. An underpass addresses these issues, but at a monetary cost. In some situations, the benefits of the higher-cost solution will warrant the additional expense.

Q5b: Under what circumstances should the City not choose the least-expensive solution?

Expense is not always a function of initial monetary investment, but also should include the impact on property values, tax revenue, neighborhood attractiveness, and quality of life. In planning meetings and presentations, the impact on local neighborhoods and communities must be addressed before any expenditures are approved. In addition, for major projects, the built-in assessment and review windows should be utilized to ensure that the initial parameters of the project are being followed and all the correlated impacts mirror the initial estimates.

6. Accommodating growth

According to the US Census, the City of Houston is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) forecasts that the City of Houston will add 23,000 people and 9,000 housing units per year for the next ten years. The format of this growth will be governed by Chapter 42 of Houston's Code of Ordinances, which was originally written in 1982 to govern greenfield development. However, much of the forthcoming population growth is expected to happen in denser, infill developments, and these will also be guided by Chapter 42.

Increasing density can make a city more livable and sustainable if essential infrastructure is in place. This infrastructure includes improved streets and drainage, guest parking, transit access, parks and green spaces, upgraded electric and utility distribution, and space for staging solid

waste collection. Imposing unplanned, piecemeal residential density without first having these infrastructure requirements in place burdens residents with unacceptable neighborhood environments. In its current form, Chapter 42 fails to anticipate or address the cumulative impacts of increasing density, and this summer's amendments to Chapter 42 not only fail to resolve this issue; they expand the impact to all areas within Beltway 8.

Q6a: What policies should the City implement to better anticipate and address the impacts of inevitably increasing density?

This is one of the most serious questions facing the future of Houston. Houston's strength is in its range of population and its various business centers – each of which have different infrastructure capacities to support current and continued growth. The City's Code of Ordinances must be reviewed and updated to address current and future growth. Likewise, any applications for building permits must include a study of the impact of a project on the local communities, specific surrounding and contiguous neighborhoods, business and economic activity and traffic. Additionally, infrastructure needs must be outlined at the initial application phase of the process. If an adequate infrastructure does not exist, then the infrastructure needs to support a specific project must be identified, reviewed and approved PRIOR to the granting of any permits.

We pay for roads, storm sewers, wastewater lines, and utilities by the mile. The lower the density of development, the farther people must travel to reach jobs, stores, and entertainment, and the more we pay to build and maintain infrastructure.

It would be fiscally-responsible for the city to incentivize denser development where the infrastructure is already sufficient. For example, costs of development in Midtown, which has a lot of street capacity, good utilities, and excellent transit access, should be less expensive than elsewhere.

Q6b: Should the City use performance measures or other means to steer dense development to areas where appropriate infrastructure exists or is planned?

Given the estimates of Houston's future growth, and recognizing the attractiveness of the outlying areas, the City should pursue both options – enhancing areas with existing infrastructure as well as creating infrastructure in areas further away from the City center.

Parking is a contentious issue in many neighborhoods, and improper management of parking infrastructure can degrade the quality of development. Parking requirements that are not case-specific can stifle growth by raising the cost of development and can deaden what would otherwise be vibrant urban places by replacing activity centers with parking lots. However, for all areas outside downtown, the City of Houston has one-size-fits-all parking requirements that consider neither the specific characteristics of a given neighborhood nor the vision held by residents for their neighborhood.

Q6c: Should the City adopt new context-sensitive parking requirements that consider factors such as access to transit and presence of shared parking?

As part of a review of infrastructure permit applications, the City should require a study of parking facilities and the impact of parking needs for the proposed project would have on the contiguous and nearby neighborhoods.

Shared parking facilities can enable disparate developments to consolidate parking, thereby transforming land that would have otherwise been used for bland parking facilities into vibrant activity centers. Furthermore, properly managed shared parking facilities could be tapped as a revenue source for the City.

Q6d: Should the City participate in providing shared parking outside of the central business district?

The City government has the ability to bring together private and public interests in order to facilitate the best solutions to any challenge. The City should continue to use this "Bully Pulpit" to find the best solutions – whether they be a publicly funded one, private investment or a combination of the two.

That's it! You're done! Thank you again for your participation, and good luck on November 3rd!

CTC
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