

# CTC 2009

## 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](http://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**

Save this Word document to your computer, and be sure to include your name in the file name.

Open the document in Word and type your answers in the boxes provided. (Boxes will expand as needed.)

Save the file when you're finished.

Email your completed questionnaire to [candidates@ctchouston.org](mailto:candidates@ctchouston.org).

Thank you in advance for your participation!

### **OK: By Fax**

Print this document.

Write or type your answers to each question in the boxes provided.

Fax your completed questionnaire to **(713) 529-1392**.

Please call Ian at (713) 576-9574 to report that the fax has been sent. Thanks!

**Candidate name: Peter Brown**  
**Position sought: Mayor**

## **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?

My top priority will be to give more transportation choices to residents so that they can work, live and shop in the way they choose. Reducing traffic congestion is a big part of this, as this reflects the economic, quality of life and environmental improvements that will come from a better managed transportation system.

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

As mayor my top priority would be to ensure that the regional transportation plan provides for a truly integrated network with more transportation choices. In order to achieve this I will work with stakeholders to develop and implement a strategy that looks at every facet of transportation planning (construction, development, public transit) and sets real goals.

## **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?

Yes. I have long supported an expanded menu of transit choices for the Houston region including light rail, bus and the sidewalk and streetscape network to make it successful.

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

One of the greatest challenges facing the new light rail lines is the lack of the necessary pedestrian environment to support it. Without walkable streets along and adjacent to light rail, ridership will be discouraged and businesses along the rail lines can't prosper.

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?

Unfortunately, the recently approved Urban Corridor Ordinance did not go far enough in encouraging urban-type, transit oriented development along the new rail corridors. I advocated for including parking benefits as an incentive to developers. As mayor, I will propose a revised ordinance to encourage pedestrian-friendly, transit oriented development along the rail corridors because it's good for Houston and it's good for business.

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 year 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 METRO Solutions measure passed by the voters in 2003 requires that a vote be taken on the diversion before November, 2013. The will of the voters will play an important role in determining any steps the city would take. I would probably favor seeking a new agreement between METRO and the City, because I don't think that at this point and in our current position it would be feasible for the City to lose that revenue. I've been disappointed in the results we've gotten from METRO, and would be hesitant to spend more taxpayers money there without more accountability and greater transparency from the agency. Since the agreement doesn't expire until 2014, I think we should continue to evaluate the situation. I do believe that these funds should be dedicated to improving mobility. And a portion should be allocated specifically to projects that attract investment and support our transit system, such as road improvements that make park-and-rides more accessible, and sidewalk improvements around METRO rail stops to make them pedestrian friendly.

### ***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?

Yes. As mayor I will instruct the Public Works Department to maximize mobility options in each project they undertake. I will also instruct city staff to advocate for this position at the regional level as well.

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

The city currently funds sidewalk construction within a limited framework (schools, thoroughfares), but as mayor I will prioritize sidewalk construction and maintenance funding within a well-conceived framework for transportation in general.

#### ***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?

I support the Gulf Coast Rail District and improvement to the freight rail system. A planning study has already been conducted which identifies a number of at-grade freight rail crossings that if eliminated could greatly reduce congestion and keep rail traffic from interfering with cars. The elimination of these at-grade crossings should be done in partnership with the major rail companies and other transportation agencies (TxDOT, Harris County) and as mayor I will support pursuing federal funding for this.

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?

As Houston, Austin/San Antonio and D/FW develop into larger cities, the need for alternative transportation options such as high-speed rail will become increasingly important. Without expanded travel options, the roads that connect these cities and the airports that serve them will become overwhelmed. I support efforts to bring high-speed, inter-city rail to Texas.

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?

Yes. As mayor I will advocate for long-range planning to define corridors and station locations for regional and inter-city rail in a transparent, stakeholder-driven process.

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?

As stated previously, I believe the city should participate in the improvement of freight rail in the Houston region.

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?

Yes, the city should strongly advocate for rational funding decisions with respect to regional transportation projects. Segment E, for the reasons stated in the introduction to this question, is a project whose need is not yet demonstrated. Additionally, funding this now would be at the expense of projects that could have a bigger impact on reducing congestion and increasing transportation choices in the Houston area. As mayor, I will advocate for a rational, long-term funding plan for regional transportation projects and I will advocate for adherence to this plan.

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?

Yes. As mayor I will appoint competent and skilled council members and staff to both the Transportation Policy Council and the Technical Advisory Committee at the MPO. I will also seek to ensure that as the largest single municipality in the MPO our representation is commensurate with our size.

### ***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?

Infrastructure creates wealth and as mayor I will lead the charge in prioritizing the city's future infrastructure investments. With approximately 20% of the city's area presently being undeveloped we should focus on areas where the city will comprehensively focus its resources for economic and community development. This will ensure that public and private investment works synergistically to grow Houston in a rational way.

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?

The type of infrastructure planning process I will institute at the city will take these situations into account. Long-term economic analyses will frequently bring to light situations similar to that in your introduction. For example, my office quantified the long-term property tax implications for the city from METRO's proposed overpass on the East End line. When these are taken into account, the greater near-term costs often pale in comparison to the long-term reduction in potential property tax revenues possible with an underpass. This is a classic case where the city should not advocate for the least-expensive solution, but rather the best solution.

## ***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?

As previously discussed, the City needs to balance incentives and infrastructure planning to encourage the appropriate density for the appropriate areas in Houston.

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?

See immediately previous answer. My plan will steer development to areas which can already support density or to areas where public investment will be made. It will prevent development in areas where infrastructure is insufficient.

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 a city council member I specifically advocated for using context sensitive parking requirements – in this case reduced parking requirements for development near light rail – as an incentive for transit oriented development along METRO’s new light rail lines. Without this, one of the great benefits of rail (transit ridership and thus the reduced need for parking) is going unrealized. As mayor, I will push for “smart” parking requirements – requirements that take into account the development environment.

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?

Yes. I believe one vehicle for providing shared parking is to direct or partner with tax increment reinvestment zones or management districts to build and operate these facilities in many of the city’s current major activity centers.

That’s it! You’re done! Thank you again for your participation, and good luck on November 3<sup>rd</sup>!