

HOUSTON, TEXAS: THE MAIN STREET CORRIDOR PLANNING AND RESEARCH PROJECT



The Main Street Corridor, looking northeast from the Astrodome to Downtown Houston.

The Main Street Corridor is the historic core of the Houston region. In the mid to late 1800s, it served as Houston's economic center and residential "grand avenue." In the 1930s, Main Street was extended outward to serve new cultural and recreational institutions and more dispersed, auto-oriented development. Construction of a citywide freeway system beginning in the 1950s, however, contributed to the decline of the eight-mile-long corridor. The inner corridor, between downtown and the museum district, was especially hard-hit by the resulting shift in economic activity to other parts of the region.

In the 1990s, the corridor experienced a resurgence of interest and investment. Private and public sector groups undertook a variety of efforts to revitalize and redevelop Main Street. These groups have recently come together to form the Main Street Coalition, a broad-based partnership that is working to develop and implement a unified vision for the corridor. The Coalition's goals are to:

- Revitalize and transform the Main Street Corridor through the strategic integration of land use and transportation/transit;
- Stimulate and intensify development, including inner-city residential housing, new businesses, and urban beautification;

- Offer an alternative to the continuation of the fragmented, haphazard development patterns of the last few decades;
- Coordinate and leverage public and private investment; and
- Institute innovative techniques to evaluate the success of these activities.

Partners in the Coalition believe that by coordinating transportation and land use planning for the corridor, they can reduce automobile dependency, increase access to jobs, services and cultural amenities, and preserve valuable community assets.

"Houston's Main Street provides an opportunity to unite public institutions, the business community, entertainment and cultural venues, new sports facilities, and a great medical center with a growing residential population."

– E.D. Wulfe, Chair,
Main Street Coalition

THE PROJECT

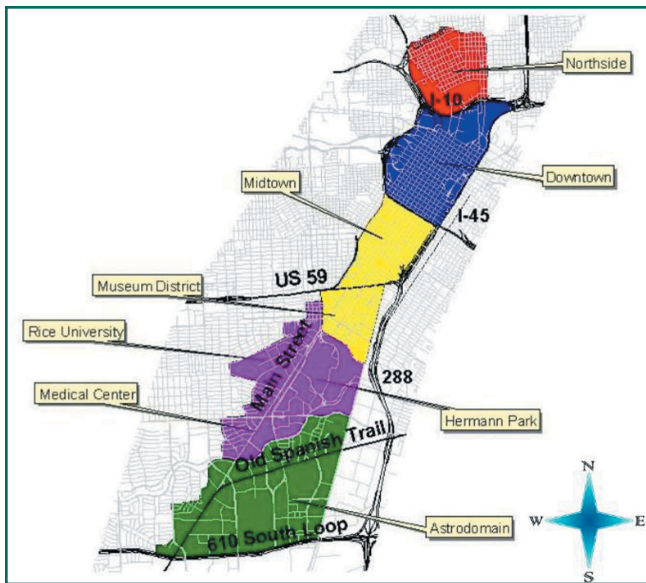
Houston's Main Street Corridor Planning and Research Project is a multi-year Transportation and Community and System Preservation Pilot Program (TCSP) project, receiving nearly \$3.4 million in federal funds between FY 1999 and FY 2001. Local contributions of cash and in-kind services are valued at over \$800,000. While the City of Houston is the grantee, work is being coordinated by the Main Street Coalition, a broad-based group of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders.

The project includes three distinct components:

- **Planning Activities**—Preparation of a corridor Master Plan and a Strategic Plan to guide implementation.
- **Evaluation Activities**—Evaluation of the planning process, data collection on existing transportation conditions, and development of a land development forecasting and evaluation model.
- **Implementation of Physical Improvements**—Three pilot projects serving as prototypes for additional physical improvements.

As of early 2001, the Master Plan and Strategic Plan have been finalized, and pilot physical improvements are in the planning stages. Evaluation activities are also being





Planning districts in the Main Street Corridor.

initiated. The project's "benchmarking" activities will include travel surveys to document current travel patterns in the corridor and attitudes toward different transportation alternatives. A geographic information systems (GIS)-based "Land Development Model" is being developed to track and forecast changes in development patterns in the corridor. A pilot application of the model is expected in 2002.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTICIPATION

An important emphasis of the Main Street Project is the building of broad-based public and private partnerships. The absence of zoning laws in the City of Houston means that public agencies have little authority to implement land use policy unilaterally. As a result, cooperative arrangements are necessary to guide land use and development.

The Main Street Coalition includes:

- Central Houston, Inc. (a business association);
- The Midtown Redevelopment Authority;
- The South Main Center Association;
- Institutions such as the Texas Medical Center and the Museum of Fine Arts;
- State and local educational institutions;
- The City of Houston;
- Harris County;
- The Metropolitan Transit Authority;
- The Houston-Galveston Area Council, the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the region;
- The Texas Department of Transportation; and
- Other civic groups and nonprofit and business organizations.

A precedent for cooperative planning was first established in 1994, when local businesses and institutions formed the nonprofit Making Main Street Happen, Inc. (MMSH) to promote the revitalization of Main Street. The Main Street Coalition, established in 1998, built on this effort and brought together an even broader range of stakeholders. The Mayor of Houston encouraged the formation of this coalition in order to coordinate the numerous planning activities in the corridor, including visioning led by MMSH, a light rail transit (LRT) investment study by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO), highway improvement projects by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), a corridor Master Plan, institutional master plans, and private development activities.

Since much of the land in the corridor is owned by major institutions, the involvement and leadership of these institutions has been critical to the project's success. One such institution is the Texas Medical Center, one of the largest employment centers in the region. Others include Rice University, the Museum of Fine Arts, the "Astrodome," (overseen by Harris County), and government complexes downtown.

RESULTS

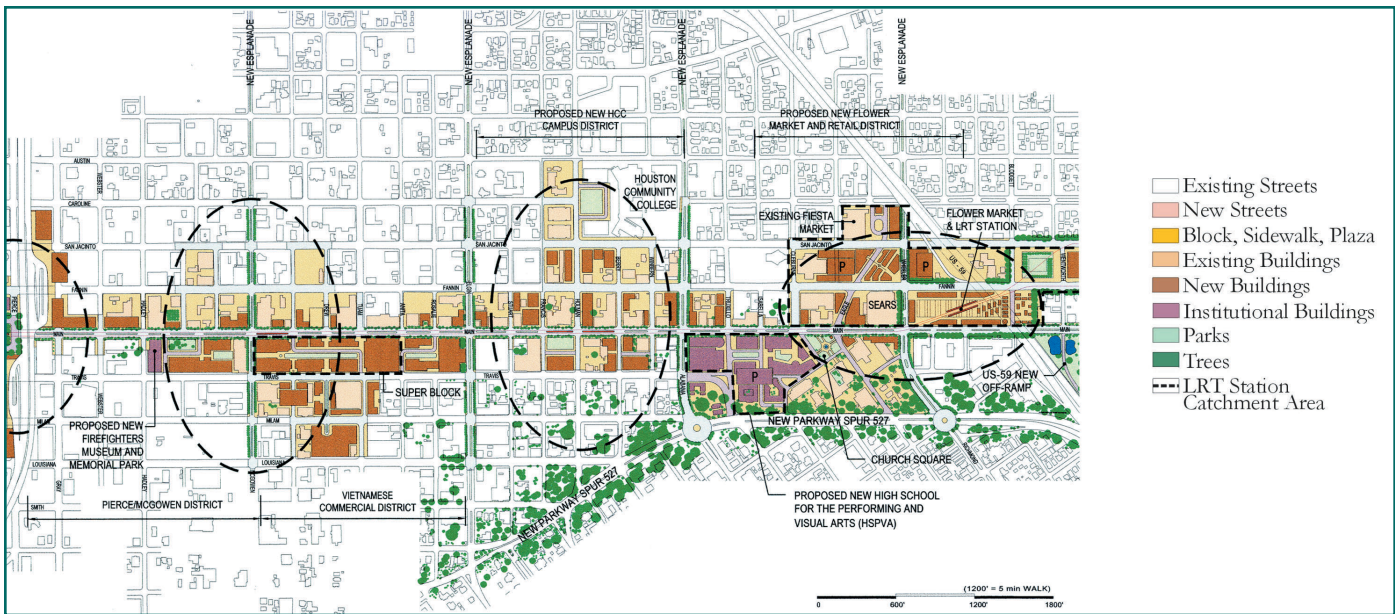
Planning activities for the Main Street Corridor have moved quickly, and the Master Plan was made public in August 2000. Organized around seven geographical districts, the plan establishes a number of principles for the corridor, which include:

- A continuous and inclusive corridor, spanning at least two blocks on either side of Main Street for its entire length;
- Higher coverage, higher density, and a mix of uses;
- Parking resources at intersections with major highways (10,000 spaces are recommended);
- LRT stations to become the focus of smaller districts;
- Emphasis on the public environment; and
- Landscape connections throughout the corridor for recreation, aesthetics, and flood control.

"The emphasis [of the plan] is on public spaces—the streets and squares that will link various uses together. High-coverage buildings are encouraged to promote street-oriented architecture and active sidewalks. Although there is less open space, it will be of a much higher quality."

– Main Street Corridor Master Plan





Master Plan for Midtown District *Courtesy Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects*

The Strategic Plan, completed in January 2001, makes recommendations for implementing the Master Plan. Implementation will require a total of \$200 million over 20 years in public and private resources. The plan will be carried out through staged public infrastructure improvements. These improvements will be coordinated with the establishment of guidelines and regulations for specific development districts. The purpose of these development districts, according to the Master Plan, is “to attract developers who favor controls as a means of protecting their significant investment in a higher-quality environment.”

Rather than prescribing types of land uses, the district-level development guidelines will emphasize design characteristics such as building heights, setbacks, materials, and open space character. These guidelines will be implemented through existing local administrative entities, such as the Houston Downtown Management District and the Midtown Redevelopment Authority, and through new entities created for other parts of the corridor. The City of Houston is also streamlining the permitting process to provide incentives for developers who adhere to Master Plan concepts.

REACTIONS

Will developers and public agencies adhere to the concepts proposed for the Main Street Corridor? Patricia Rincon-Kallman, project manager for the street corridor project with the City of Houston, is optimistic. She notes that planning for the Main Street Corridor “has not occurred in a vacuum.” Both the Master Plan and the Strategic Plan were developed on a consensus basis, with the involvement of numerous parties

including many property owners. According to Ms. Rincon-Kallman, the development community—led by larger institutions and property owners—has been instrumental in persuading other property owners to adopt and apply Master Plan principles.

Evidence suggests that developers are indeed concerned about adhering to these principles. Some property owners have donated land for public spaces as part of the pilot projects. The Medical Center is coordinating improvements with the Main Street Coalition. The city, which meets with developers to discuss specific proposals, reports that developers always support the Master Plan principles in concept, and adhere to them at least partially—if not always fully—in project implementation.

Public agencies are also coordinating activities. The city has entered into a partnership with TxDOT to coordinate pedestrian and LRT improvements with highway improvements along the southern part of Main Street, a state highway. METRO has sponsored pedestrian and streetscape improvements to the downtown area, including Main Street.

LESSONS LEARNED

While the Main Street project is far from complete, some lessons have already been learned, especially from the Main Street Coalition’s experience with public-private partnering:

Communication and coordination are critical. Ms. Rincon-Kallman noted that careful integration of strategic plans; good information and communication with involved parties, including elected officials;





Streetscape Concept for Main Street in Midtown
Courtesy Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects

numerous meetings; and “coordination, coordination, coordination” allowed the Coalition to present itself as strongly credible and as a unified and powerful voice.

Build trust through small-group and one-to-one meetings. Partnering is always a challenge, particularly with a large and diverse group of stakeholders. Project leaders found that stakeholders did not want to reveal their agendas in large group meetings, but that they were more open in small meetings and one-on-ones.

Implementation: The Third Ward Connectivity Project

The Third Ward community, located on the south-eastern edge of the Main Street Corridor adjacent to the Museum District, is one of Houston’s oldest and most populous, predominantly African-American neighborhoods. This neighborhood also houses two of Houston’s largest institutions of higher learning. The Third Ward Connectivity Project—one of the pilot implementation projects for the Main Street Corridor—will enhance existing links between the Third Ward neighborhood and Main Street. The project consists of transit and pedestrian improvements, including infrastructure, street furniture, landscaping and public art, on lateral streets connecting to Main Street transit stops. The project also includes the development of streetscape design plans for these lateral connections.

The project is funded by \$2.4 million in federal funds and \$5 to \$10 million in local capital improvement funds. Project design is expected to start in the summer of 2001, with construction initiated by the end of the year. This implementation project represents a unique opportunity to leverage ongoing planning, design and revitalization efforts and investment activities of the Third Ward Redevelopment Council, the City of Houston, Metro, TXDOT, and private investors.

Keep people continuously engaged. The strategic planning process for the Main Street Corridor was completed in under four months. While coordinating plans in this short time frame was difficult, early and regular engagement of stakeholders kept the process moving forward. Immediate progression from one step to the next, rather than “resting on our laurels,” helped to keep people engaged with the issues.

Private-sector involvement is critical to success. While the Main Street Corridor has benefited from a renewed wave of investment, public and private coordination has helped to establish a common set of principles to ensure that this development is pedestrian-oriented and transit-supportive. The foundation for success has been the business and institutional communities’ desire to create and adhere to an overall vision for the corridor, thereby benefiting each stakeholder through the increased economic value created.

Urban arterials can be reinvented with a transit and pedestrian focus. The conceptual plans for the Main Street Corridor show how strategies such as adding street-fronting buildings, pedestrian connections, public spaces, and landscaping can transform an auto-dominated environment into one that is inviting for pedestrians and transit users. While transforming the entire corridor will require a coordinated effort, small-scale pilot implementation projects will demonstrate initial benefits and spur further interest in urban design and development practices.

The Main Street Coalition’s efforts represent a multi-year, multi-faceted undertaking. Some outcomes—such as the impacts of combined transportation and urban design improvements on transit ridership, vehicle-travel, and air quality—remain to be determined. As pilot implementation and evaluation activities are undertaken in 2001 and beyond, the success of the project at achieving its objectives for transportation, community, and system preservation will become more fully understood.

For further information:

City of Houston, Department of Planning and Development
Patricia Rincon-Kallman, Assistant Director
713-837-7858

patricia.rincon-kallman@cityofhouston.net
<http://www.ci.houston.tx.us/pd/>

Main Street Coalition:
<http://www.mainstreethouston.org>

