



**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:

<b>BEST: By EMAIL</b>	<b>OK: By Fax</b>
<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 <a href="mailto:candidates@ctchouston.org">candidates@ctchouston.org</a>.</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 <b>(713) 529-1392</b>.</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:**

**Melissa Noriega**

Position sought:

**Houston City Council At-Large Position 3**

**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?

The City's primary goal should be to work with the other area governmental entities to create a regional transportation system to enhance both our quality of life and economic strength.

This includes reducing traffic congestion.

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

Houston needs to be a leader in creating a **regional** transportation system. Residents should have a central role in planning for their communities – we need to utilize the untapped knowledge of our community. The City should work to empower regional participation by creating tools, providing education, and implementing a support structure to improve the process of civic discourse. Transportation, in particular, is a long-term proposition, and needs more than six years of attention. Building the relationships and infrastructure to address this in a reasonable way becomes more important.

## **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

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

The City needs to engage in long-term planning, design for transit and solicit community involvement. Let's use some of the resources we have like easements. We need to stop the artificial distinctions between light rail and commuter rail – we need both for either to work. We also need regional relationships to play in the high-speed Texas initiatives. A passenger rail between New Orleans and Houston would have incredible implications for folks washed up here by the waters of Katrina. Serious rail planning should be regional and is much needed.

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?

The City should investigate and develop new requirements that will improve the long-term health of the City. My hunch is that this is evolving, and we need to respond appropriately.

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?

Things that end up leaving money on the table need to be evaluated – this is not a simple issue and needs serious Council attention and public input.

### **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

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

Sidewalks should be a development requirement and should be maintained as part of a long-term city infrastructure maintenance plan. I have championed sidewalks and see them as an important part of the urban landscape. We need to look at creative partnerships to increase efficiencies in this area.

### **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?

Yes, the City should be a leader in leveraging state, local and federal resources to improve the freight rail system. We should coordinate regional efforts and utilize our state and local delegations for the benefit of the entire region. Freight rail affects public safety and quality of life, as well as transit.

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?

Yes

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

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?

Yes

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 green space 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?

I have real concerns about this project. Houston and Harris County citizens need to make some decisions about what they think is important.

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, by assigning additional staff and resources and by networking with other regional members. I am currently an alternate to the TPC, and think it serves an important and crucial role in the process.

## **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?

Yes, we really need to consider a world class CIP, which includes all city assets and prioritizes improvement and replacement based on established metrics, not just district or political needs.

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 City should attempt to quantify both short and long-term benefits and costs, including those that are not easy to quantify, and make decisions based on the complete picture – not only the short term expense.

## 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?

Improve our modeling ability, look at multiple changes- not just one at a time - but as part of a whole, and create a world class CIP to address increasing density in an organized manner.

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?

Yes

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?

Yes

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, when appropriate.

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

