

## City hopes forums help shape transit corridors

Having residents, builders involved should facilitate plans, officials say

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City officials today will launch their latest attempt to influence the form of new development in the city's rapidly changing core.

A workshop at the George R. Brown Convention Center will explore ideas for development standards around five corridors identified by Metro for construction of rail or bus rapid transit lines during the next five to seven years. The potentially affected areas include dozens of residential neighborhoods and commercial centers, mostly inside Loop 610.

The transit corridors concept is the latest strategy in an ongoing struggle to capture the economic benefits of a surge of new development in central Houston while offering some protection to the character of older residential neighborhoods.

For much of its history, Houston's growth has proceeded with little government intervention, driven by prosperity and an abundance of available land. In the past few years, however, public officials and community leaders have sought ways to control the impact of growth on the environment and quality of life.

"Houston is growing up," said Marlene Gafrick, the city's planning and

development director. "Houston is not going to remain static. Change is coming."

Development input

Today's event is the first of several forums meant to glean ideas from residents and businesses about the form they would like development to take as transit brings more people into their neighborhoods.

City officials will use these ideas to draft development rules appropriate for the affected areas, Gafrick said. The city might require wider sidewalks, for example, to facilitate projects that allow people to walk among homes, shops and workplaces.

Houston's last overhaul of its development code, known as Chapter 42, came in 1999 with an ordinance that limited housing density inside Loop 610 to 27 units per acre — a compromise that satisfied neither developers, who wanted a higher limit, nor neighborhood leaders, who pushed for a lower one.

In 2003, city officials drafted an "area plan" ordinance that would have empowered management districts or similar entities to write development standards unique to those areas. The idea drew strong opposition from

developers and was never presented to the City Council.

#### Creating 'transit villages'

Developers are likely to be more open to the transit corridor planning than to earlier efforts, in part because Mayor Bill White's administration has worked hard to include them in the process, said Mark Kilkenny, the city Planning Commission vice chairman and a senior vice president of Mischer Investments, a major development firm.

Kilkenny chairs a Planning Commission committee studying transit-oriented development and mixed-use development, concepts likely to be prominent in the transit corridor planning discussions.

The concepts are based on the idea that transit stations, particularly those where transit lines converge, provide good opportunities for developments that combine housing, shops and entertainment in "transit villages."

Kilkenny said these discussions will provide a platform for a broader examination of the city's development rules.

"Our assignment is not just to look at transit-oriented development as it relates to rail, but that is obviously a place to start," Kilkenny said.

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