

Metrorail's Future Plans

Five years ago, Houston opened its first light rail line. It has been a success by any measure, carrying more people per mile than any other U.S. light rail line outside of Boston. Forty percent of them were not riding METRO before the rail opened.

It has also been five years since Houstonians voted to expand the system, and the results there are less obvious.

The plan includes five new lines by 2012: the North Line, extending the current line northwards; the East End Line down Harrisburg; the Southeast Line, from Downtown past UH to Palm Center; the University Line, connecting UH, Midtown, Neartown, Greenway, and Gulfton; and the Uptown Line, extending the University line to the Galleria and the Katy Freeway.

So far, there has not been a single foot of new track in the ground, the construction contract remains in negotiations between METRO and Parsons Transportation Group, and METRO still has not figured out how to get the Uptown tracks past Memorial Park.

But this year has shown signs of progress. Utility construction has started on Harrisburg, a preview of the thousands of orange barrels to come. The North and Southeast Lines have completed the environmental process and are now eligible for federal funding (and there will be more of that to go around soon: the federal stimulus bill included additional transit funding). The lawsuit that was threatening to stop the University Line has been dismissed.

Meanwhile, the city is working on new rules to make sure that passengers will be able to walk safely to the 48 new stations. An Urban Corridors Planning study, conducted by The Planning Partnership of Toronto, recommended wider sidewalks, the elimination of mandatory setbacks, reduced parking requirements, protection for established neighborhoods, and financial incentives for denser, more pedestrian-friendly development in the corridors around the new lines. These recommendations are now being considered by a Planning Commission subcommittee that will propose new ordinances to City Council sometime this year.

METRO intends to start construction on the Southeast, North, and Uptown lines this year, and the University Line in 2010. All five lines are scheduled to open by 2012, as promised in the 2003 referendum. Projections call for 250,000 daily riders on 38 miles of line, which would be more than three times as many as Dallas carries on 45 miles today.

-Christof Spieler



ECONOMY

TIPPING POINT

National Economy Woes Catch Up with Houston

HOUSTON'S ARCHITECTURE, ENGINEERING, AND CONSTRUCTION

industry remained cautiously optimistic long after the national economy slowed. The explanations for Houston's continued strength were many. "Buoyed by the price of oil" and "never had a bubble won't have a bust" were popular. The change in course came earlier for some sectors. The end of the homebuilding boom was expected. By September, when Lehman Brothers collapsed before the last winds of Hurricane Ike dissipated, Houstonians learned the distinction between a financial crisis and a plain-old recession. Though the local economy remained fairly healthy with low unemployment and a diversified business sector, national lenders stopped financing arguably sound investments.

Locally, several hundred floors of towers and hundreds of thousands of square feet will go unbuilt. The Sonoma, the Titan, the High Street, Turnberry Tower, the Hanover Apartment Tower

and Ritz Carlton Hotel at Boulevard Place, and Regent Tower—all have been delayed or redesigned at a smaller scale. Though the Ashby Highrise developers continue to file for permits and "Tower of Traffic" signs linger in Boulevard Oaks and Southampton, the grand confrontations between high-rise developers and neighborhoods—and the political momentum needed to plan for a projected population growth of 3.5 million people in the Houston area by 2035—appear to be on hold. High Street is a steel skeleton, Sonoma now a fenced-in mud pit of undetermined fate. The sheer decadence of the Titan with its units named after Coco Chanel, Pablo Picasso, and Frank Sinatra shimmers only on the website, a testimony to what seemed development business as usual a few months ago, but now defines the excess that led us into this mess.

The retail closings—Starbucks, Circuit City, CompUSAs—have compounded the problem leaving empty retail space. The new Circuit City on the Katy Freeway is closing before it even had a chance to open.

Some firms in niche markets, doing institutional projects, or working overseas have retained the same number of employees or have grown, yet the number of layoffs reported in *Architectural Record* are dizzying. Royce Builders has closed and nearly every local architecture firm has had at least one round of layoffs. 2008 may have been the end of an era in Houston architecture. What will the era be called? Sadly, many an architect will have the spare time to mull it over.

-Raj Manḡad