

A REGIONAL MOBILITY PLAN FOR HOUSTON

Does Adding Freeway Capacity Cure Congestion or Create It? And How Will it Play in Plano?

CONGESTIVE

There was not much public reaction when the 15-year, \$16.2-billion traffic-congestion relief package known as the Regional Mobility Plan (RMP for short) was unveiled in February 1982. An effort of the Houston Chamber of Commerce Transportation Committee, composed of representatives of the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Harris County, the City of Houston, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the Texas Turnpike Authority, consultants Turner, Collie and Braden and the Rice Center, and Friendswood Development Company (a major developer and a subsidiary of Exxon; its president, John Turner, headed the committee) the RMP was coordinated by the Chamber's Roger Hord. The result represents an unprecedented attempt at consensus planning for a city which looks on itself as the heartland of cowboy capitalism.

Only one critic, planning consultant Ray C. Lawrence, dissented. In an op-ed piece in the *Houston Chronicle*, Lawrence denounced the RMP as "1960's answers to 1980's problems."

Said Lawrence: "I submit that the proposed plan is out of date already, that it will not solve Houston's traffic problems, and moreover that it will only contribute to a continued decline in quality of life and further deterioration of our city as an enjoyable place in which to live and work. It is at best a temporary fix that only postpones more fundamental changes that should be launched now."

For the most part, however, those few paying attention tended to side with the Texas Society of Architects, which gave the Chamber of Commerce its Citation of Honor for "addressing the suffocating problem of traffic congestion in Houston in a bold and creative fashion" that exemplifies "voluntary community service at its best."

Controversy has been reserved for two smallish parts of the plan—Metro's proposal for an elevated rail line through downtown Houston, and the proposed toll road north from Loop 610 along the Hardy Street corridor—which together add up to less than one-fifth of the total spending slated for the RMP. The proposed toll road and the Metro rail plan are hardly gnats, but while Houston has been straining at them the several camels in the rest of the RMP have been swallowed without complaint.

Leave aside, for the sake of the argument, the implications for Houston's urban fabric of a plan that proposes 30 miles of dedicated high-volume transitway (read Metro rail) and 300 miles of new freeways into the hinterlands—seeking to cure congestion by the same method used since the late 1940's.

Consider: Is Houston really ready for 170 miles of double-decking on the West Loop, Southwest Freeway, Katy Freeway and I-45 North, lending darkness and noise amplification to the amenities of what are already among the most heavily traveled roads in the nation? That is what the RMP suggests. The RMP calls for a lot more concrete in Houston—so much so, in fact, that current spending levels fall over \$9 billion short of what's needed, and even several billion dollars in new state taxes and fees, and a 73-percent increase in city and county spending for roads may not be enough to cover the bill. To date, Houston freeways have at least been democratic, allowing laborers from the East End to travel side-by-side with corporate lawyers and River Oaks matrons. Are Houstonians ready to see the upper levels of the newly double-decked freeways turned into toll roads 20 hours per day, the affluent whizzing above, those lacking the necessary fees crawling along underneath?

Paul Burka's thought-provoking reflections on mass transit hereabouts ("The Subway That Ate Houston," *Texas Monthly*, May 1981) contained much to startle the complacent.

"Urban sprawl, an abomination to all planners, is not the enemy in Houston. Companies can move far from downtown without diminishing the tax base," Burka wrote.

Perhaps the most remarkable of Burka's assertions was this on traffic congestion: "Houston's traffic isn't as bad as its reputation. There is no problem getting around town except at rush hour." Burka cited his time on a 5:00 pm "test run" from downtown to Gessner and

Bissonnet as proof.

Many motorists would disagree and be able to cite a good deal more direct evidence. Burka was unassailably on target, however, when he suggested that business connections between Metro and most of Houston's professional traffic specialists had the effect of stifling criticism of the project's technical flaws.

That goes for the RMP, in spades. There are not many traffic professionals in the Houston area who don't work for the state, the county, the city, Metro, Metro-hired consultants like Houston Transit Consultants and the Rice Center, or Turner, Collie and Braden. The handful left would have to be crazy to slap the hands of *all* these largesse-doling agencies. The RMP, if it accomplishes nothing else, has solemnized the *de facto* merger of the bureaucracies involved.

That accounts for much of the silence since the RMP's release. None of the transit professionals contacted for

IS HOUSTON REALLY READY FOR DOUBLE-DECKING ON THE WEST LOOP, SOUTHWEST FREEWAY, KATY FREEWAY AND I-45 NORTH, LENDING DARKNESS AND NOISE AMPLIFICATION TO THE AMENITIES OF WHAT ARE ALREADY AMONG THE MOST HEAVILY TRAVELED ROADS IN THE NATION?

this story would talk on the record, and few would talk critically at all, beyond a few whispered charges that the plan is "just business as usual for the highway lobby," or "It's postponing disaster at best."

Representatives of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation have made public speeches urging popular support of the RMP. Other measures have been taken by a few private citizens, like those of the Texas Crushed Stone Company, which invested more than \$30,000 for radio spots deploring Houston's traffic congestion in 1982, and paid for billboard signs (on I-10 at the West Loop and I-45 at Little York) urging motorists to make their feelings known.

"We are in the business of selling roadbuilding materials, but we're also concerned about the deterioration of the area's roads. Our trucks get held up by traffic and damaged by chuckholes just like other vehicles," says James Isbell, a spokesman for Texas Crushed Stone. "We decided to contact some officials about our views and then we heard that the Chamber of Commerce was working on the RMP. We met with Roger Hord at the Chamber and with some of the technical people involved in drafting the RMP and got a look at what they were doing."

Explains Isbell: "Our reaction was, 'Hey, this is just what we were trying to promote.'"

Strife in the Fast Lane

The RMP is published as two documents: an 80-page report and a brief summary (available from the Houston Chamber of Commerce; the report costs \$20 and the

summary is \$2). The plan consists of three parts. The first is an assessment of traffic congestion in Houston and its costs. The second part presents suggestions for alleviating traffic congestion and reversing the "trend of mobility demand outstripping supply." The third part identifies possible "funding resources" to cover costs for the additional roads and other facilities called for in part two.

There is many a shudder of masochistic pleasure to be had in reading the RMP's first part. It's like having your doctors switch their diagnosis from hypochondria to leprosy. Houston planners qualified for large chunks of federal highway funds by getting an early start—the outline of the area's freeway system was laid down in the late 1940's. The intention then was to alleviate the traffic jams afflicting major thoroughfares; it was believed that building freeways that radiated from and ringed the city center would end traffic jams for the rest of the century. During the decades since then, Houston has continued the population growth it has historically shown—roughly doubling every 20 years since the city was founded. Most of Houston's freeway system was completed by 1970. In the next 10 years, freeway miles available grew 22 percent. Population, however, grew 38 percent, and vehicle registration in Harris County grew 71 percent, almost twice as fast. Vehicle-miles-of-travel in the county increased even faster—77 percent—and the portion of vehicle-miles traveled on freeways (as compared to total road surface available) tore off at a 106 percent increase. By 1981, 40 percent of the vehicle-miles traveled in the county were on freeways—a jarring statistic, considering that freeways represent only about two percent of total road surface. By nationally-applied standards (more conservative than those applied by the state highway department) freeways are considered adequate to serve no more than 13,000 vehicles per lane per day. In 1981, the Houston-area average daily traffic per lane of freeway was already more than twice that—26,650 vehicles per day.

The RMP quotes figures from the Texas Transportation Institute and engineering consultants Turner, Collie and Braden that compare freeway congestion in Houston with that in other cities, using a "congestion index" on which 1.0 is pretty good, anything over 1.5 is seriously crowded and 3.0 is "critical."

In 1969 the average congestion index value for Houston freeways was 1.2. Only the Gulf Freeway, at 3.1, was critical. In 1981, all of Houston's freeways were considered worse than critical, with an average congestion value of 4.6. And in 1983? No figures exist, but it is estimated that the average congestion value has gone over 5.0, with several freeways close to 6.0.

Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation studies show average afternoon peak-period travel speeds fell from 36.6 to 24.4 miles per hour between 1969 and 1979. During the same period, the studies show, the land accessible within 30 minutes from the downtown central business district decreased from 457 square miles to 282 square miles.

Worse yet, the "peak period"—remember when it was called "rush hour"—spread out like a cloud of humid, polluted air.

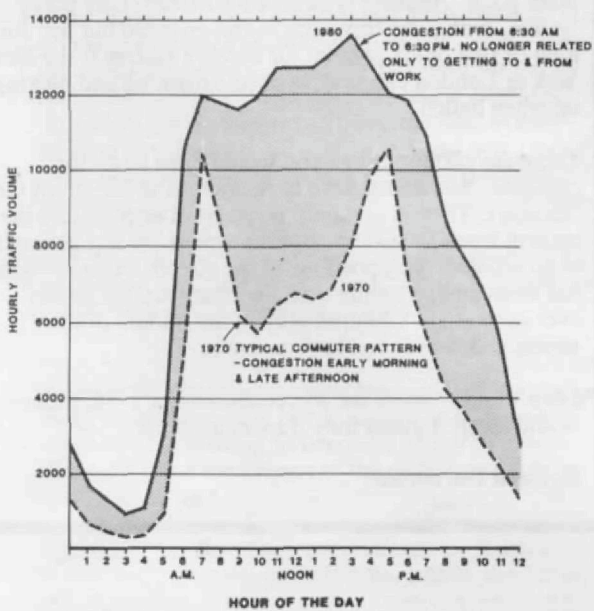
"The average duration of traffic congestion city-wide increased from less than two hours in 1969 to an estimated 7.5 hours by 1981. Some especially critical locations experience continuous congestion for 12 [to] 14 hours per day," the RMP report says, citing examples on five out of six Houston-area freeways and seven major thoroughfares. The development of 12 to 18 additional suburban employment centers before the year 2000 will spread congestion throughout the region, the report contends—initially alleviating some demand from existing centers but later adding their own commuters to the mix, the way Greenway Plaza did in relation to downtown. The report suggests soberly, "Peak period congestion has offset the mobility benefits our freeway and street system is intended to supply."

For those inclined to shrug off the deterioration in mobility, the Chamber Transportation Committee added another filip—they figured out the cost of the congestion to the average Houston-area resident, resulting from time lost, increased insurance costs and higher fuel consumption.

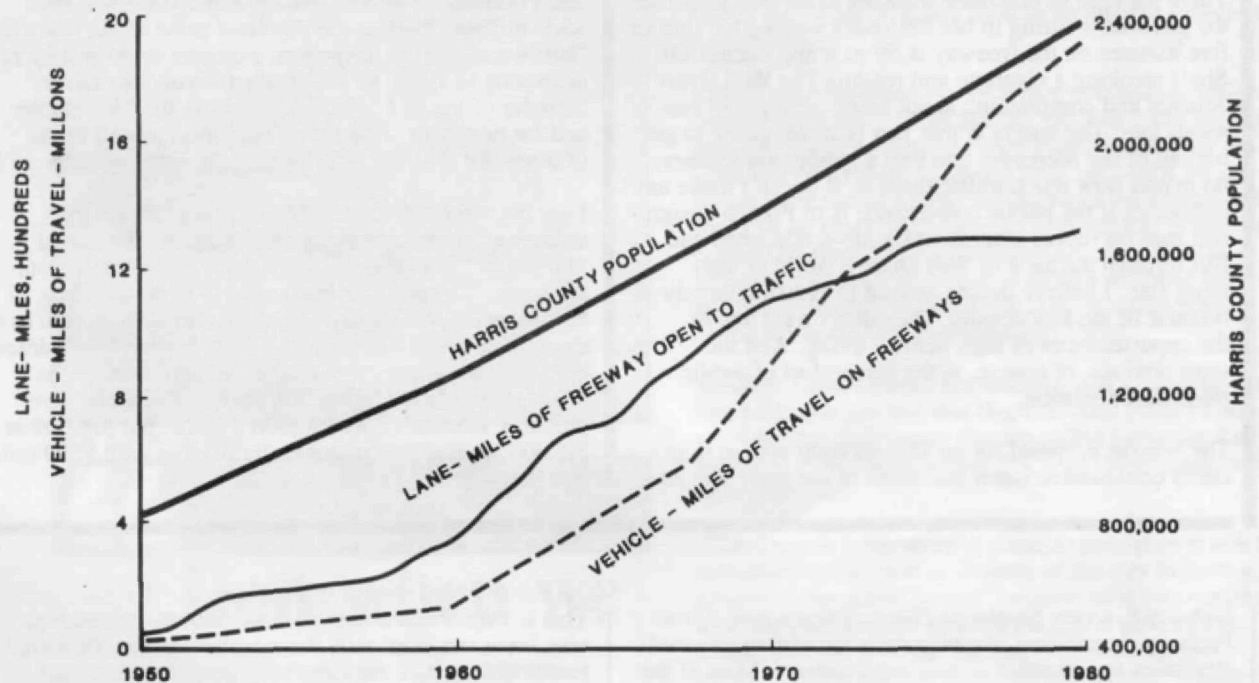
"Houstonians are paying a 'congestion tax' estimated to

Joel Warren Barna

FAILURE



Above: Typical Weekday Hourly Traffic Volume at the Southwest Freeway and South Rice. (A Regional Mobility Plan for the Houston Area, Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1982).



Development and Use of Freeway System in Harris County (Includes Expressways). (A Regional

Mobility Plan for the Houston Area, Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1982).

be \$1.9 billion per year, or almost \$800 per county resident per year," the RMP report concludes.

What the framers of the RMP propose is first catching up with what is already needed, then allowing for an additional one million people in the area's population in the next 15 years. At the end of that period, if the RMP is followed, congestion in Houston will be no worse than it was in 1975—definitely the good old days compared to what it would be in 1995 without the improvements called for in the plan. The way to achieve this, they suggest, is to build 1000 miles of new streets, 300 miles of new freeway, add 170 miles of freeway lanes to existing freeways, mainly by double-decking them, build 30 miles of high capacity commuter rail lines, construct or straighten out intersections and grade separations, toss in a toll-financed highway and a couple of toll bridges and a couple of dozen park-and-ride facilities. The list of projects runs 24 pages in the report.

It has been argued in all seriousness—particularly by opponents of funding for mass transit—that nothing should be done to alleviate traffic congestion in situations like this. The reasoning goes that if no new facilities are built, development will move to less congested areas and Houston will become an even-density city with diffused population and employment. The second version of this argument is that centralized planning is too ponderous to respond to future growth and development and that by the time facilities are constructed, they will be in the wrong place.

The problems with these arguments are numerous. First of all, the diffused employment/population hypothesized for the future is *already* under way. That's what Greenway Plaza and City Post Oak and Park 10 are all about. Houston is already a diffused city. The problem remains, however, that even with this diffusion the traffic congestion is suffocating and costly. Of course there are other options—businesses and workers could decide to locate in Austin or Dallas or Little Falls, Minnesota. The point is exactly to prevent that from happening—to keep Houston and its tax base growing and to delay as long as possible the day when the city begins its inevitable decline. The problem with the second argument is that it ignores the already enormous investments in infrastructure made in the Central Business District, the Medical Center and other employment centers. Currently there are 175,000 people working downtown, and this number will increase, according to recent estimates from the Rice Center, between 20 and 40 percent, even without additional transit facilities. In any foreseeable future these areas will remain focal points for employment, as will other nodes in the Houston-area grid. The CBD and other employment centers either can be properly served or they can be ignored, so as to provide a stimulus to as-yet-undeveloped areas. Clearly, it is in Houston's interest to choose the former alternative. The chaotic, sprawled development of Houston in the past

20 years didn't happen entirely by accident—it was a by-product of a series of conscious decisions to rely on freeways as a tool for determining Houston's urban structure. There are manifest advantages to such decisions, but there have been side-effects as well—the low quality of over-extended sewers and police- and fire-protection, for example.

The diffused-city arguments are irrelevant to the RMP, moreover. The five agencies involved in its implementation all represent entrenched bureaucracies with enormous budgets. They would not wither away if the RMP had not been devised. They would be spending (and in some cases, collecting) billions of tax and tax-backed dollars in Harris County in the next 15 years anyway. The great virtue of the RMP is that for the first time Metro, the agency charged with providing mass transit in Houston, has joined with the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation and the rest of the agencies; and they are at least trying not to work at cross purposes. Perhaps if this kind of coordination had been undertaken 10 years ago, we wouldn't be in such a spot.

It's a pity there is no evidence to suggest that Houstonians (with the exception of those already in van-pools and using park-and-ride buses) are really willing to use public transportation regularly. If that were the case, the RMP shows, optimum spending would not be four-fifths road-building, one-fifth transit. The best thing would be to spend every penny on mass transit.

In a section on capacities afforded by different modes of transportation in the RMP, the following equation is explained: one lane of freeway traffic equals 13,000 vehicles per day; one freeway lane dedicated to buses or "high occupancy vehicles" equals 2.5 freeway lanes, and one "high capacity transitway" or rail line equals 14 freeway lanes. Thus a double track two-way transitway equals 28 lanes of freeway—twice the current capacity of the North and Eastex Freeways.

Take the case of the North Transportation Corridor for example. Hardy Street runs north-south between I-45 and US-59 where the two freeways run parallel less than six miles apart. Analyses quoted in the RMP show that this North Transportation corridor will require 60 freeway lanes by 1995 in order to meet the RMP's 13,000 vehicle/lane/day goal. In fact, the corridor is already some 20 lanes in arrears. The RMP proposes increasing the present capacity of US-59 and I-45 to the equivalent of 28 lanes, leaving a "shortfall" to be filled by a toll road along what is now Hardy Street, to be constructed and operated by the Texas Turnpike Authority, which already operates a toll bridge across the Houston Ship Channel in east Harris County. The toll road would be built in such a way as to allow for a future rail-transit line connecting downtown to the Intercontinental Airport. The rail line would be added in 10 to 15 years.

Roger Hord of the Chamber of Commerce admits that building a six-lane tollway first, at a cost of approximately \$400 million, then adding a rail line costing approximately \$750 million (adding the equivalent of 28 freeway lanes) looks like a lot of overlapping expenditure.

"You have to remember," Hord says, "that we're talking about funds available over this period. Metro could put a rail line in that corridor, but there wouldn't be anywhere near the ridership needed to justify the cost. Metro could probably spend that money serving other areas more effectively, until the density of the Hardy corridor merits a rail line. The toll road would not require either MTA or state tax funds, meaning that those funds can be spent on the east and southwest sides of town where they'll do the most good. The different agencies worked out this coordination in informal give and take. There's no way we can pay for everything we need without at least \$2 billion coming from toll-financed facilities, and the Hardy Toll Road is the right place to start."

There is a bad side to this amiable collegiality, however, according to some transit professionals—it looks and feels like political deal-cutting and back-scratching, wherein each agency's funding and clientele are protected. Consider Metro and the Texas Turnpike Authority.

Persuasive as it is, Hord's argument is bolstered by another fact which draws its force from the friendly give and take Hord says resulted in the RMP. The Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation has three commissioners, one of whom is John Butler of Houston, an entrepreneur in energy exploration, appointed by former Governor Bill Clements. The Texas Turnpike Authority has a board of directors, on which sits John Butler. TTA has been pushing for the Hardy Toll Road for most of a decade. An agreement on RMP plans that left out the TTA's Hardy Toll project might not have had Highway Commissioner Butler's complete support.

The RMP achieves a lot in practicability with these kind of trade-offs. The problem is that the plan never addresses *why* Houston's freeways failed to alleviate traffic congestion the way they were supposed to—why, in fact, they have seemed to *generate* congestion. And as a result, the RMP is already planting the seeds of its own failure.

The reason freeways seem inevitably to become overcrowded is because freeway access is valuable. The RMP ignores this fact in its planning, which means that the new freeways in the plan will quickly fill up beyond their capacity, just as our present freeways have.

The RMP calls for 300 miles of new freeway, including



I think it's pretty clear that no matter what kind of mass transit system we have, 90% of the people aren't going to use it. There are 10% of the people who are either too old or too young or too poor or too nervous or too sick and have to be driven around. The other 90%, I believe, would really prefer not to have any mass transit.

There's a kind of crocodile thinking to all this. Consider the girl who's sitting in her Mercedes waiting for four or five minutes on the freeway at 59 as it approaches 610. She's smoking a cigarette and reading *The Wall Street Journal* and complaining about being a couple of moments late. The reality is that you're never going to get her out of her Mercedes and into a public conveyance, no matter how much traffic there is. It doesn't make any difference if the public conveyance is of French design and runs on rubber wheels and is air-conditioned and flies through the air *à la* Walt Disney World or anything else. I believe people moved to Houston largely because of the low density. They don't want any of the appurtenances of high density living. And the most obvious, of course, is the discomfort of public mass transportation.

The present proposal for an 18-mile train system is so easily confounded when you think of the cost. The ad-

mitted cost is \$2 billion. And if my proposal seems a little bit foolish at first, a lot of things that sound foolish sometimes have a grain of sense about them. If one were to take—starting with a single unit—say, a Mercedes 400 SL, which is everybody's dream, and say that it costs \$50,000. Say that you bought ten of them, that would be \$500,000. And 100 would be \$5 million and 1,000 would be \$50 million and 10,000 would be \$500 million. Well on the purchase price of the so-called "hardware," we've only spent a quarter of what they're proposing to spend on trains. And if you take the remainder of the \$1.5 billion to maintain the Mercedeses and for people to drive them, then there are all kinds of possibilities.

I use the term "Mercedes" because it's just a very attractive car and it's everybody's dream. The word "Mercedes" is to give it some magic and to catch your attention. Not only is it irresponsible to be spending \$2 billion on a 19th-century transportation system such as a train, it's equally irresponsible to be buying Mercedeses from abroad or any other kind of vehicle that can be made in the United States. Of course, American cars probably wouldn't cost \$50,000 a piece, but \$16,000 or \$18,000, so that you're not really dealing with \$500 million but with \$250 million, if that.

If you had 10,000 fine cars driving around the city there are various systems for hailing them. For example, you could have a telephone system like the present taxis, only it would have to be developed because of the enlarged nature of it. But when you have that many units chances are you could have free taxi service (or virtually free taxi service) from any single point in the city to any other point. Another system is the Mexico City jitney system, with a car travelling a known route but just for a total of five or six people. Or another system is the New York or London cab system of just roaming and picking up when hailed.

There are certain things you would have to do for example. You would have to restrict these cars from the freeways. There's certainly no point in aggravating the present freeway system. But the streets are not generally overcrowded. Vast portions of the streets are in residential areas and so lightly travelled that they are hardly ever used at all. Children play in the middle of the streets and don't even have to move.

I don't know where the Mercedeses—let's call them—would sleep. I guess they'd roam all night.

Howard Barnstone

Beltway 8, a new Northeast Freeway and a new Alvin Freeway. In addition, the plan calls for adding elevated structures to 170 miles of existing freeways. Most of the freeways in Houston currently have entrance- and exit-ramps at intervals of 1.5 miles or less. The proposed elevated lanes would allow entrances/exits at approximately five mile intervals.

In addition, says the Chamber's Roger Hord, most of these elevated lanes are to be dedicated, at least during peak periods, to bus/high occupancy vehicle use, making each of them equivalent to 2.5 conventional freeway lanes. Tucked away in an appendix of the RMP report, says Hord, is a suggestion for financing these double-decked lanes. "What we're thinking now is that at off-peak hours they'll be toll lanes," Hord explains.

Around 20 hours per day? "That's right."

The stretched-out access of the elevated lanes is important, according to Peter C. Papademetriou, author of the study, *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston 1830-1980*, published in January 1982 by Metro. The upper lanes will do what freeways are supposed to do (although with considerable cost in noise pollution and visual insult)—carry people on long distance trips, providing extra capacity that is qualitatively different from the capacity of already existing freeway lanes.

Papademetriou uses the West Loop as his example to explain the "feedback loop" syndrome in freeway congestion. The method used to handle access to the West Loop, Papademetriou writes, "may be seen now as the cause of the eventual evolution of urban development... and a major contributing factor for the distance between original intent and current reality."

Expanding on this assertion, Papademetriou explains that the West Loop, once at the western fringe of the city, was intended as a "by-pass parkway loop," a belt road linking the routes radiating from the city center—and it was envisioned as primarily carrying through traffic from the radial routes. The "distance between original intent and current reality" arises here, since local traffic on the West Loop has severely curtailed its function as a by-pass belt road.

Road planners have two options on how to treat access to highways. One is to purchase all access rights from the adjacent land, making the road a "throughway" with widely spaced entrance- and exit-ramps. The second and less expensive option, and the one almost invariably chosen in Texas, is to forego buying access rights from the adjacent properties and to construct the highway with parallel frontage roads, allowing frequent access to the highway. This access, Papademetriou says, citing the West Loop example, "generated increases in land value and a *de facto* prescription of probable land use," replacing residences and small businesses with high-density commercial development, generating traffic which used the West Loop as if it were a local street or a collector street. Such a traffic pattern, exactly the opposite of what was intended, swamped the freeway's capacity to handle by-pass traffic and eventually threatened to throttle development served by West Loop access (requiring additional capacity).

This is why, Papademetriou says, double-decked freeway lanes can help: with their limited access, they will function more like the originally-intended loop road. The 300 miles of new freeways proposed in the RMP, however, with their frontage roads and high-rent access, will soon be generating their own hyper-congestion.

In fact, the evidence is strong that the process has already started. Beltway 8, the new ring road planned for the outer reaches of Harris County, is intended to do what Loop 610 was supposed to do when it was built. Current traffic congestion already justifies building the road. But, according to a speech by RMP task force chairman John Turner, reported in the press in January, construction of Beltway 8 is already being delayed by an unanticipated problem. Land prices along the proposed route are skyrocketing.

FOR THOSE INCLINED TO SHRUG OFF THE DETERIORATION IN MOBILITY, THE CHAMBER TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE FIGURED OUT THE COST OF CONGESTION TO THE AVERAGE HOUSTON-AREA RESIDENT—ALMOST \$800 PER YEAR.

"In the southwest part of the county, land prices have gone from a few thousand dollars per acre to \$2 per square foot," Turner said during a recent interview in his Greenspoint area office.

"Increases like that could deplete the funds available for acquiring land and significantly delay the project," Turner said, adding that the only thing to do was press ahead quickly before prices started rising on the land needed for other projects called for in the RMP.

The land prices are rising partially to cash in on the possibility that they'll be purchased for highway right-of-way. More importantly, however, they are rising because the access provided by the new freeway will make the adjacent properties hot for development - as land along Loop 610 became when that road was begun. As happened along the existing freeways in Houston, this

will cause the development to turn Beltway 8 into a giant local street, instead of the loop road it's supposed to be.

It's not hard to imagine, along about 2005, that there will be another RMP with its own bold solutions to the mobility crisis plaguing Houston's 300 miles of 10-year-old freeways.

Freeways—Not Free

There are indications that the really hard part of the RMP is going to be coming up with the necessary money, even for agencies as adept at prying money out of taxpayers' fingers as the highway department and Metro. The third part of the RMP report identifies possible "funding resources" to close the \$9.6 billion gap between current spending levels and the costs of the RMP. Getting the funds delivered, the report says, will require "a consensus among our political representatives that transportation is our area's number one problem."

It will also require a great deal of cooperation from state officials and legislators with constituents to serve in other, competing, districts. How will the State Representative from Plano feel when it is suggested that not only must Texas almost double its annual highway budget, but that the proportion of that total budget going to Harris County must be increased from 25 to 30 percent? Or that the moribund Public Transportation Fund must be reinstated, given a minimum of \$15 million, and 50 percent of it dedicated to Houston for the next 15 years? How will Mark White, pledged to no new taxes, react to suggestions that the state motor fuel tax be revised and increased, that a separate state sales tax be applied to motor fuel, that the four percent motor vehicle sales tax be dedicated to the Highway Fund, or that the motor vehicle registration fee be doubled? Lots of people who voted for him might take it amiss if he went for all this, particularly when the RMP also calls for taking money from General Revenue and Education funds. Mark White says his first priority is education.

The RMP also calls for the city and county to increase their road budgets by 75 percent per year. Several local officials have already said that it's not likely to happen. And will local voters, many still steamed at Metro, approve the creation of the proposed Harris County Turnpike Authority to collect the "user fees" on those double-decked freeways?

Both Roger Hord and John Turner say they are confident the funds can be arranged. The Lieutenant Governor is from Houston, the Harris County legislative delegation is big and seniority-heavy. The new Speaker of the House is closely allied with the head of the Texas Municipal League. And, of course, stories about the highway lobby not getting what it wants are as rare as orchids on the Southwest Freeway median. The outcome of the effort on the state level will be apparent soon, as the legislature will either approve or kill the proposed state funding mechanisms in the current session.

From there it's just a countdown to RMP II.