

# Incremental City Planning for Houston

Peter Brown

City planning is a long-established civic institution in America, starting with the early city plans of the 18th and 19th centuries and continuing through the "City Beautiful" movement of the turn of the century and the functional and central-business-district comprehensive plans of the 1960s and 1970s. In some states, such as New Jersey, comprehensive plans are required of every municipality by law. However, it has been many years since the City of Houston has undertaken a serious, comprehensive planning effort. During the past year, through the initiatives of Mayor Kathryn Whitmire and her director of Planning and Development, Efraim Garcia, the city has started a new and ambitious planning process, currently referred to as the Compendium of Plans. The objective is to create over the next three to four years what most cities refer to as a comprehensive plan.

The basic approach in this current planning effort is to assemble or piece together (as in a compendium) a series of area-association and neighborhood-area plans, either recently completed, or to be undertaken in the future, which, when welded into a composite document, will constitute a new plan for the city. Area-association plans representing larger suburban growth areas will be funded and prepared by groups (primarily formed by the real-estate community) such as the West Houston Association and the City Post Oak Association, while neighborhood-area plans are those for established, inner-city neighborhoods such as the Fifth Ward. Garcia's Department of Planning and Development will be responsible for coordinating the entire effort, and in-house staff will prepare some 27 neighborhood-area plans. All of the plans will be prepared according to guidelines already established by the department.

The city, therefore, will provide the overall framework for incorporation of the various sub-area plans into a comprehensive document and will coordinate the various metropolitan plans for transportation, drainage and storm-water management, water and waste-treatment systems. It is expected that the process will be sanctioned by approval of City Council resolutions authorizing the director of Planning and Development and the City Planning Commission to proceed with the plans.

The purposes of the Compendium of Plans are stated in the City Council resolutions: "The existence of a planning process will have a positive effect on the city's bond rating;" "The City Council wishes to initiate a planning process that includes substantive participation by citizens and by neighborhoods, civic and area associations . . .;" "The city wishes to establish as a part of the planning process the development of a long-range redevelopment strategy for certain eligible neighborhoods of the city;" and the plans developed in this process "will also be used in establishing priorities in the capital improvements

planning process." More specifically, the council resolutions state that the plans will be used as a guide in selecting projects for the capital improvements plan, selecting capital projects for funding from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, designating Tax Reinvestment Zones (Tax Abatement Districts), and identifying target areas for assisted housing and private-public development projects.

Efraim Garcia emphasizes this new planning effort is a way to "plan for growth, rather than reacting to growth," and his goal is to "turn the process around." Traffic and public services are key issues, as well as the revitalization of inner-city neighborhoods. Garcia says the plans will also serve as a tool to coordinate now-disparate plans and projects, determine major development opportunities, "deal with" high-growth areas, rationalize the relationship of living and employment areas, and provide statistical input to the major thoroughfare planning process. Yet he clearly stops short of seeing the plan as a normative "vision of the future" for Houston, and thinks that urban design, although important, is not a critical issue. Garcia underscores the wording of the resolutions that state that the plan is in no way intended to be used as criteria or guidelines for approving or denying development approvals. Therefore, every effort is being taken to assure detractors that this is not a back-door step toward additional development controls or zoning. But, he does note that through previously adopted ordinances and the City Charter, the Planning Commission is already fully empowered to prepare a comprehensive plan for Houston and its extra-territorial jurisdiction areas.

#### The Department of Planning and Development Process

The planning process begins with a designation of the geographic boundaries of each of the area associations and neighborhood planning areas. During this pro-

cess, Garcia's department works out a contract or basic agreement with each of the area associations to prepare the plans and utilizes neighborhood input on inner-city plans. Garcia is establishing an Oversight Committee composed of businessmen, professionals, government officials, and civic representatives to review the various plans as they are being prepared, and to make recommendations to the Planning Commission for approval. In addition, there is the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) Committee, and an interagency coordinating committee (composed of representatives from the city, county, HISD and other school districts, and METRO) which will handle metropolitan or regional issues such as major thoroughfares and drainage. The CIP Committee also will be involved in the review process, especially in terms of evaluating and prioritizing capital improvements projects, as well as the CDBG Committee composed of the Community Development Program commissioners and representatives. In addition, committees from other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Houston Builders Association are taking a strong interest in this planning process.

In three to four years, Garcia envisions a practical composite document which he suggests the City Council might formally adopt. Projects and areas with adopted plans would be given priority in allocating CIP funds and possibly utility and other permits. This is an approach apparently advocated by council member Jim Greenwood and others who are inclined toward "growth management."

Three public hearings are involved in the process for each plan. There will be a major initial public hearing to solicit citizen input. When the final draft of the plan is complete, there will be a second public hearing. After final revisions, the plan is ready for adoption and incorporation into the compendium, based upon the third public hearing before the Planning Commission.



*The encroachment of commercial structures on residential neighborhoods has forced many to reconsider the need for planning in Houston (Photo by Paul Hester)*

**The Compendium of Plans Format**

The Department of Planning and Development has prepared two formats: one for the inner-city neighborhood plans, to be prepared largely by city staff, and the other for "growth-sector" area plans, to be prepared largely by private consultants working for area associations. In addition, there are specific planning standards (such as for schools and fire stations) already drafted by the planning department.

Neighborhood plans will be prepared using maps, statistics, and text. After determination of area boundaries, existing conditions - land use, structural building conditions, services (educational, shopping, governmental), traffic and transportation, utilities, existing and redevelopment sites, proposed projects, prior expenditures of public funds - will be mapped. In addition, demographic data such as household size, housing conditions, employment, crime, health statistics, area businesses, trends, will be documented for each planning area. Then, ten-year (1990-2000) goals and objectives and "conditions requiring correction" will be determined. The next step, "activity-area determination," will involve subdividing the neighborhood into activity areas, defining quickly attainable goals, and preparing a ten-year schedule for implementation of specific-action plans or projects. The final step will involve preparation of detailed activity-area plans, such as housing or retail renovation projects.

The exhibits of the neighborhood plan will include a boundary map, an existing land-use map, a structural conditions and ownership map, a public-services map, a transportation map, an activity-area plan, and other items as needed.

The area-association plans format is somewhat similar to that of the neighborhood plan format, beginning with a definition of the planning area boundaries, and compilation of a detailed data base. However, more-detailed existing data on land use, traffic and transportation, public services such as police and fire, and utilities and drainage information will be required. Environmental concerns such as flooding, subsidence, air, water, pollution, and land contamination will be emphasized. Using this data, short-term (1990) and long-term (2000 and beyond) assumptions and projections will be made for population and employment; land use and new development by type; transportation, including METRO and public transit considerations, state highways, and county facilities; and utilities and public facilities. Specific maps are not listed; however, it is assumed that existing and future land use, transportation, utilities, public facilities, and major new development opportunities will be included.

The Department of Planning and Development has drafted standards, some rather specific, to be used by neighborhood groups and area associations in preparing their plan. Emphasis is given to parks and recreation facilities, libraries, health centers, water consumption and waste-water generation, traffic generation and roadway capacities, roadway standards, off-street parking requirements, and fire and police protection. The draft standards are typical of those found in reference texts and in master plans of major cities. However, the issue of standards is quite complex and different standards should apply to different parts of the city, such as the inner-city Montrose neighborhood as contrasted with large, mixed-use planned developments in the far suburbs. Most areas of the city do not meet commonly accepted standards, and funds are not available to overcome this gap.

In addition, several city departments have spent years developing their own standards. Libraries and fire stations are good examples. (The Houston Fire Department's manual of standards is well over 100 pages long.) Standards should be realistic, up-to-date, flexible, and attainable. Sound municipal management suggests that Garcia's Department of Planning and Development should be responsible for at least coordinating, if not preparing, standards for most municipal and area-wide functions. Leaving this important function solely up to departments may lead to inconsistencies in the levels of public services provided. Houston, like Austin and other high-growth cities, faces the critical issue of provision of balanced, comprehensive metropolitan services, optimizing the use of tax dollars without significant (politically unacceptable) tax increases. This is a very difficult task. An effective, coordinated set of urban standards can be a valuable tool in optimizing (and de-politicizing) this process.

**Status of Plans to Date**

Currently, seven neighborhood plans are in progress: Harrisburg/Wayside, Heights/North Main, Manchester, Second Ward, Third Ward, Fourth Ward, Fifth Ward, and Sunnyside/Palm Center. Other neighborhood planning areas include Acres Homes, Bordersville, Carverdale, Carvercrest, Denver Harbor/Port Houston, Fidelity/Pleasantville, First/Sixth Ward, Foster Place, Kashmere, MacGregor, Magnolia, Moody, Navigation, Near Northside, Riceville, Settegast, South Park, Studewood, Tidwell/Jensen, Trinity Gardens, and West End. Base data for many of these communities has already been assembled. In some cases, this planning process has breathed new life into once passive, issueless civic groups, and has caused new groups to come into being.

The Department of Planning and Development assigns an in-house neighborhood planner to each of the groups, and this staff person works directly with local leaders and citizens in developing neighborhood plans. These areas are in part made up of boundaries already established for the CDBG program, and limited funds are available for community renewal projects, such as housing, infrastructure replacement, redevelopment of blighted areas, and community facilities. The neighborhood groups have an opportunity to influence where and on which projects limited funds should be spent.

The emphasis of these neighborhood plans seem to be in four main areas: attracting city and federal dollars for basic improvements such as streets, utilities, drainage; identifying redevelopment projects which are doable, taking advantage of CDBG and other subsidies and funds; identifying new and rehabilitation housing opportunities; and identifying projects which can interest a public-private partnership funding.

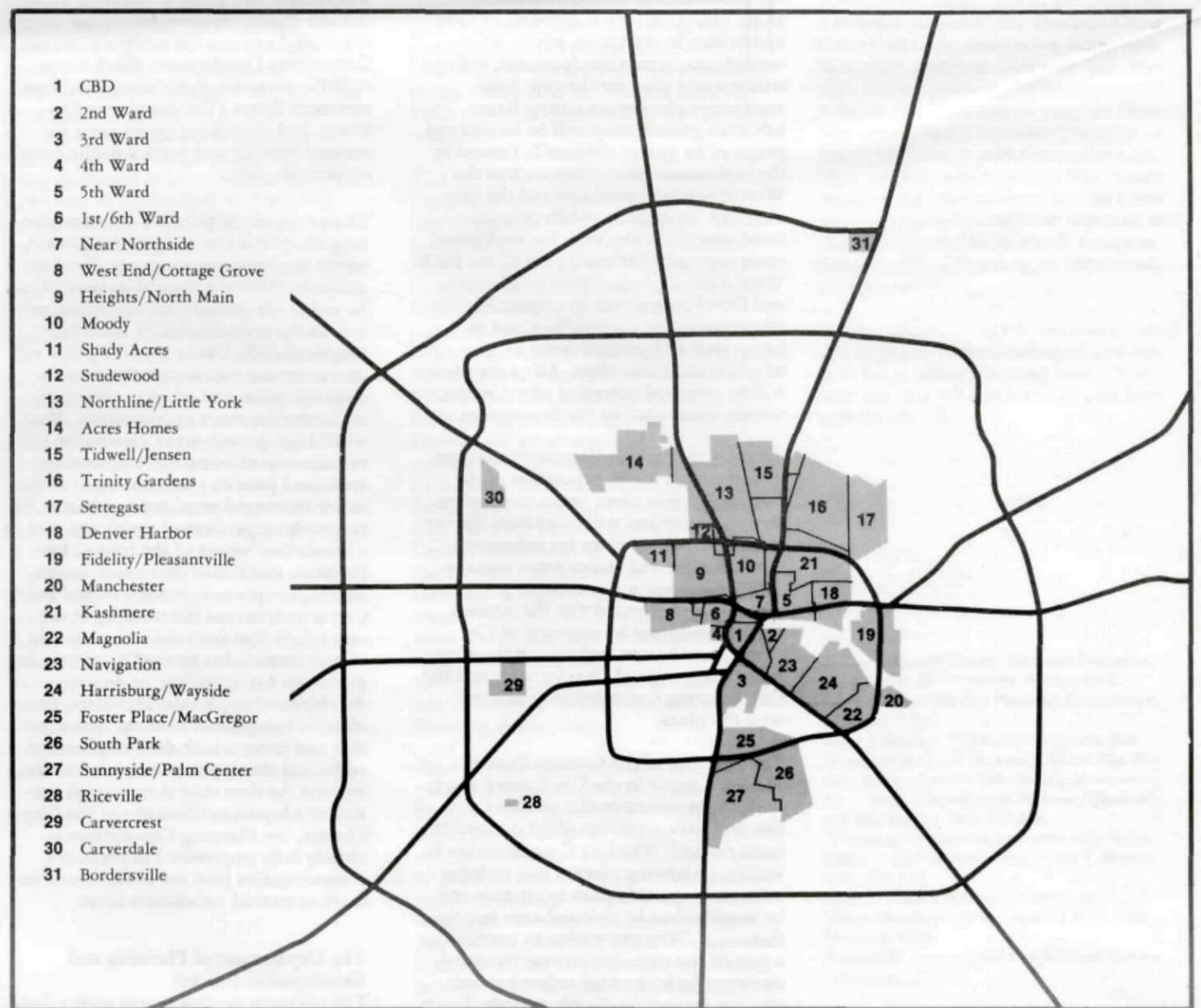
The focus seems to be on projects, and not on major urban systems. This may be politically appropriate for these older, often neglected and disadvantaged areas and possibly reflects the recent shift in Houston's voting patterns, where the coalition of minorities, students, blue-collar, and non-establishment groups have been a significant factor in Mayor Whitmire's political support. These older neighborhoods are not so concerned about regional traffic systems, sewer permits, billboards, sidewalk cafes, and subsidence. Their concerns are more basic - shopping, services, potholes, deteriorated buildings, decent housing, and jobs.

The area-association plans involve pri-

marily the more rapidly developing areas of the city. They are larger geographically and generally represent the interests of the development and real-estate community. (Please see box.) All of the area associations, except the East End Progress Association, have reached a basic agreement to proceed with a plan. However, issues of content, the degree of detail, and funding still remain. But other issues may limit the effectiveness of the area-association planning efforts. The associations may not have the funds (or staff) necessary to hire consultants to complete the work as outlined. In addition, the large geographic areas of some of the associations are not appropriate for specific planning of this type. There is not unanimity among area-association members, so key decisions on land use and streets may be difficult to achieve. Furthermore, most of the area associations represent parochial (developer) interests and do not necessarily reflect the desires of adjacent residential neighborhoods. The broader regional interests which should be represented in a major comprehensive plan can come, perhaps, from the city - not from developer associations. Finally, many areas of southwest, west, and north Houston are not included in the geographic areas represented by the associations.

**Conclusions**

The Compendium of Plans is a much-needed effort in Houston. The city deserves a workable, comprehensive plan which also contains a vision for the future of this great urban region. The plan will not be a static document, but a process that continually examines and encourages the positive growth and development of the city in a deliberate manner. The making of the plan will require coordination between major governmental units such



*Geographic boundaries of the neighborhood planning areas*

# Area Associations and Their Plans

as the county, METRO, HISD, and the State Highway Department. The plan will assist in assigning rational priorities for the expenditure of limited dollars. It should result in the least-cost approach for the city to repair the deficiencies in its public infrastructure, and will give much-needed attention to disadvantaged inner-city areas. The plan should also help to counter the negative image of Houston outside of Texas and to spur economic growth, diversification, and job formation. Overall, it will make Houston a more functional, efficient city. The taxpayer should get a "bigger bang for the buck," and, as in most cities, the planning process will cause the political system to be more responsive to legitimate interest groups.

This dual purpose - first functional and bottom-line oriented, and second, normative and perhaps visionary - should be reflected in the current planning process. However, planning has been neglected in Houston for so long, including an unfortunate association with zoning, that Garcia's approach clearly stresses the practical. This is, in part, due to the lack of adequate staff (Houston has the lowest per-capita funding for the Planning Department of any major U.S. city). Area associations are also lacking in funds to prepare plans in sufficient detail and to continue the planning process.

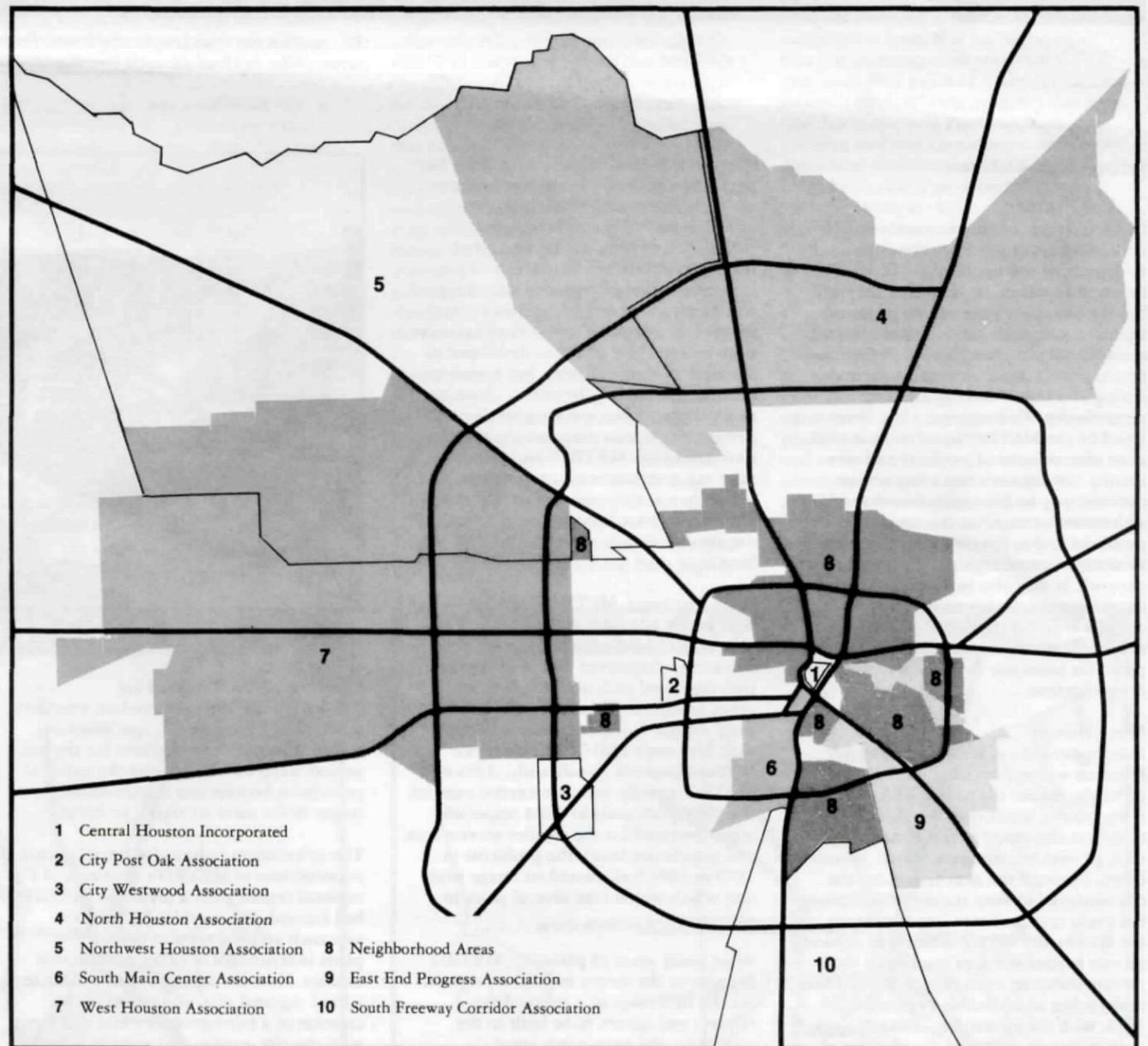
The Department of Planning and Development approach, however, has many commendable aspects. Garcia has begun the process with great practicality, enthusiasm, and confidence. Citizen participation, a key to the success of any planning effort, has received a strong emphasis and the public-private partnership approach is a good one for Houston. But as the process matures, it should become more complex and responsive to diverse citizen interests. There may be greater concern with "quality of life" and "city beautiful" issues among the voters than the current approach assumes. If this is true, the process will begin to encompass new issues, such as urban design for critical areas and corridors of the city, a "goals for Houston" process, the impact and opportunities presented by METRO, and strengthening of the ordinances to include (possibly) some form of land-use intensity standards, and broadening of the scenic-district concept.

The ultimate results of the process remain in some doubt. Without some form of land-use control (not necessarily zoning), the city is lacking in the traditional tools to carry out its plans. The "patchwork quilt" approach is too fragmented, and will tend to result in watered-down plans or plans which favor the interest group with available funds for planning. The entire effort needs the strong, visible support of the mayor, City Council, Planning Commission, Houston Economic Development Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and various business and civic groups. Finally, greater coordination is needed with other governmental units, such as West University Place, Bellaire, Pasadena, Katy, as well as the county and state.

Overall, a well-conceived planning process will generate the very tools necessary to implement the plans created by the process. However, for this to occur, the business and political leadership must come to recognize that the Compendium of Plans for the year 2000 is a singular civic opportunity of extraordinary dimensions. ■

*Peter Brown was assisted by Beth Beloff, planner and development consultant, and O'Neil Gregory, AIA, a member of the Executive Committee of the Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects.*

- 1 **Central Houston, Inc.** A coalition of downtown businessmen, companies, and property owners has funded an initial master-plan concept for downtown Houston. Key-opportunity areas, such as an arts district and a historic district, are identified. Services have been volunteered by several major architectural firms; however, an outside consultant will be selected soon. The issues here are pedestrian movement systems; urban parks, open space, and landscaping; traffic circulation and parking; treatment of buildings at the street level; night-time activity; public transit; housing; historic preservation; and, perhaps most important, creating a sound urban-design concept for our somewhat formless downtown grid.
- 2 **City Post Oak Association (CPOA).** The CPOA is composed of major developers, tenants, real-estate people, and landowners in the Galleria area. A master plan was prepared in October 1984 by a group from the Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects. It contains the basic plan elements for Houston's "other downtown," which has more office space and employment concentration than the central business districts of most American cities. The issues here are consistent development standards, including landscaping and signage; pedestrian linkages; traffic and public transit corridors; housing, parks, and open space; interface with surrounding neighborhoods; and utility capacity. The AIA plan will require revisions to meet the Department
- 3 **City Westwood Association.** This smaller area adjacent to Bissonnet between West Belt and U.S. Highway 59 has the first plan completed in compliance with the city's format. It was prepared by Charles Tapley Associates in 1984. The key issues represented in the plan for the year 2000 are transportation, future land use, open space and landscaping, area identity and "entrances," beautification, and sign control. This plan is described by Garcia's office as a "prototype."
- 4 **North Houston Association.** North Belt, Kingwood, and The Woodlands fall within this area. To date, the association, representing an area of 626 square miles, is trying to utilize the volunteer services of professional members. Key issues are transportation, including the growth and impact of the Houston Intercontinental Airport; parks and recreation facilities; the drainage, storm-water management, and water quality of Lake Houston; housing; and economic growth.
- 5 **North West Houston Association.** This area overlaps with the West Houston boundaries on the east side of Route 149, but the boundaries are not yet precisely established. The association has only a part-time staff and will not proceed with a serious planning effort until the membership has substantially increased. Key issues appear to be economic development, transporta-
- 6 **South Main Center Association (SMCA).** SMCA encompasses Rice University, the Museum/Montrose area, and the Texas Medical Center. A draft plan for this area has been completed encompassing 20 square miles. The key issues have been conflicting objectives between developers and residents and neighborhood preservation. Specific plans completed include the Binz area and the critical midtown area (south of the central business district along Main Street). The Medical Center is currently working on its own plan. This is the only area association besides the East End Progress Association to represent non-developer interests.
- 7 **West Houston Association.** This vast west Houston area of 200 square miles largely represents the city's major developers and is clearly the fastest growing area of any planning district in Houston. The West Houston Association over the past seven years has been very effective in coordinating development efforts between individual developers, the city and the county; in promoting quality standards; and in assembling important demographic and economic data. To date, there has been no real effort in starting the area plan and the association has not yet determined the contents of the plan, although there is agreement with the Department of Planning and Development to proceed. ■



Geographic boundaries of the area association planning areas

- |                                 |                                       |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Central Houston Incorporated  | 8 Neighborhood Areas                  |
| 2 City Post Oak Association     | 9 East End Progress Association       |
| 3 City Westwood Association     | 10 South Freeway Corridor Association |
| 4 North Houston Association     |                                       |
| 5 Northwest Houston Association |                                       |
| 6 South Main Center Association |                                       |
| 7 West Houston Association      |                                       |