

The Insider's View of Outside the Loop

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The terms "inside the loop" and "outside the loop" are not commonly used at City Hall when political geography is discussed. Above the neighborhood level, distinctions are drawn based on council district, ethnicity and race, income level, or neighborhood age. Location relative to Loop 610 is a poor indicator of status with regard to almost all of these. The exception is age, yet even so there are subdivisions of single-family houses inside the loop developed as late as the 1970s. Being inside the loop doesn't even establish location within the City of Houston, since West University Place, Southside Place, and Bellaire are located wholly or partially inside the loop.

The inside versus outside distinction has been raised with regard to economic revitalization efforts. Council member Dale Gorzynski recently complained that a depressed area in his district, District H, has been neglected because it is located outside the loop. The nature of the complaint illustrates why the loop is not a commonly used reference point in city government. First, Gorzynski's district is a corridor running from Memorial Park and the Heights north to Greenspoint Mall. Its large black population is concentrated in Acres Homes and Studewood, both located outside the loop, yet it also contains significant black neighborhoods located inside the loop, too. Hispanic population is growing, especially in the north side, outside the loop. Young Anglos are buying homes and starting families in large numbers at both ends of the district, on the suburban edge and in the redeveloping areas of the Heights and Westcott area east of Memorial Park. Gorzynski's concern was that he has a neighborhood with "inner city" problems on the edge of the city. The variety of neighborhoods in District H, and the unpredictability of their location with regard to the loop, explains the irrelevance of the terms in municipal government.

In discussing the city government's role outside the loop, the only clear distinction to draw is between the already incorporated area of Houston, and its huge potential area covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction. This extra-territorial area (and Houston's ability to annex it) makes Houston different from most other cities and strongly shapes attitudes and events at City Hall.

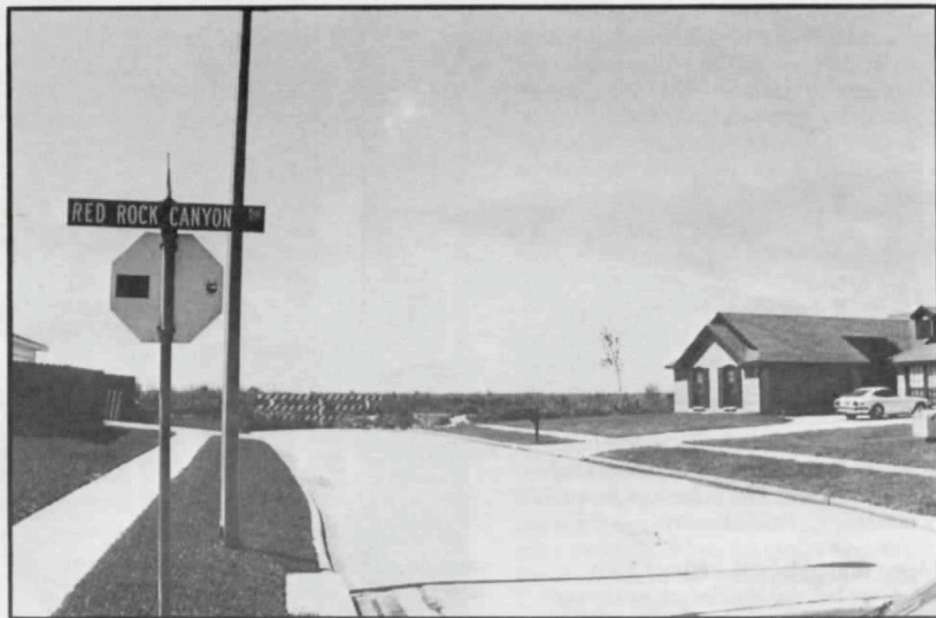


Dairy Ashford Village, Dairy Ashford
(Photo by Paul Hester)

tion issue is enough to color predictions of the future. The area between the two loops, seen as a vassal of a dense center city, becomes slated for the ambiguities of a partly urban economy. But portrayed as a collection of villages, it is promoted as an extension of endless suburbia. Neither view takes into account the simultaneously concentrated and dispersed form of present-day Houston.

Up to now, the language with which to talk about this kind of urban form has not existed. But the growth of a new descriptive vocabulary is as inevitable as the obsolescence of Houston's polarized concept of itself. The year 2000 may find the area between the loops spurned by a city growing in opposite directions. Or it may be the sought-after center of an array of inward-looking satellites. Either way, this locale will form the middle ground in a subtler and certainly more mature city, a place less willing to make strict distinctions and better able to decide its fate consciously.

Rather than evoke false expectations by reference to a single loop, residents will point out relationships in, around, through, and beyond a whole region. From loop to loop and through the loop, the Houston of tomorrow will invent a new way of talking about, and valuing, itself. ■



Stub street, far west Houston (Photo by Paul Hester)

Houston is big, and will get bigger. Annexation has brought the "central city" of Houston to 576 square miles, with another 2,000 square miles in our extra-territorial area. Houston will continue to grow for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that, on most of our boundaries, no intervening incorporated municipalities constrain us. Further, annexation can be advantageous to residents and landowners in water districts on our periphery, in some cases replacing a high water-district tax rate with a lower city rate, and providing greater resources to cope with urban problems. Also, because the development of raw land is predicated on the assumption that Houston will someday annex the area, ending annexation would mean significant disruption in the development industry. Finally, the Houston City Council (in a rare display of unanimity on an issue of this importance) favors it. Annexation is beneficial for residents and property owners within the city, and it will continue to be beneficial. The real question is, will Houston incorporate the Delaware-size portion of Texas that is our extra-territorial area? If the answer is yes, then when and how?

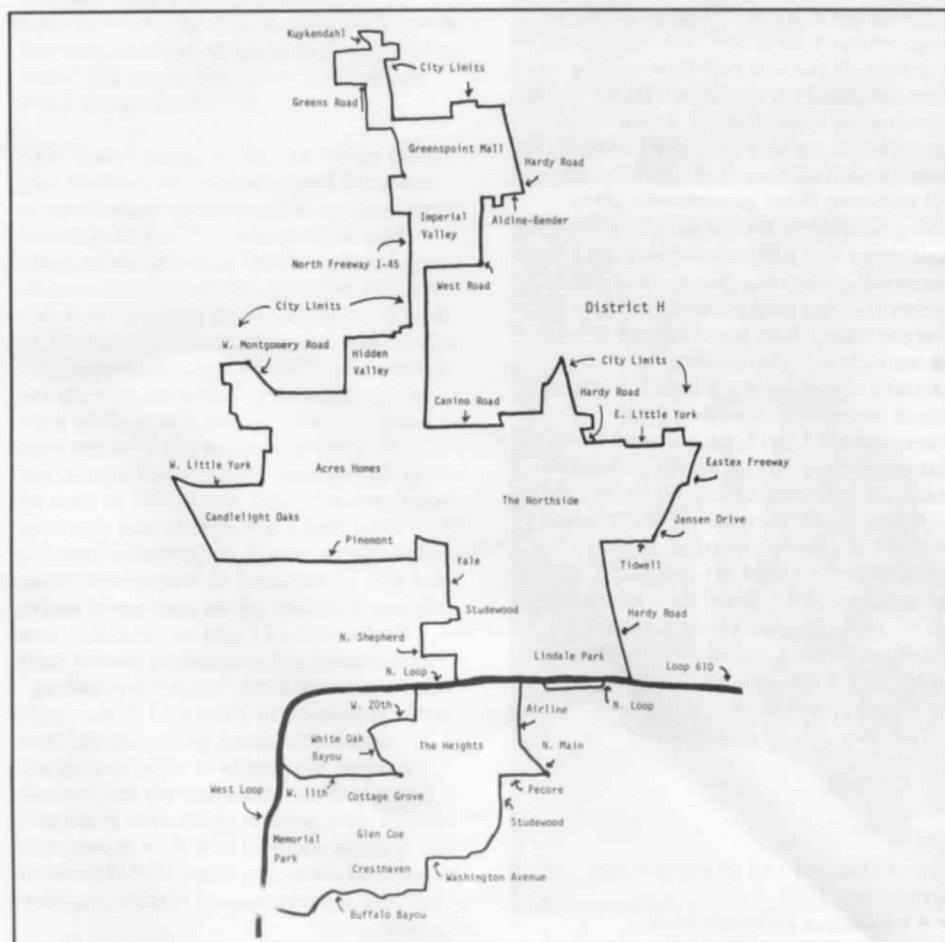
It might be useful to point out how Houston currently regulates development in its extra-territorial area. The city must approve plats of subdivisions which affect the planning of major thoroughfares, and must consent to the creation of water districts within the extra-territorial area. As part of that consent process, the city reviews and approves utility plans for these districts, and recently these plans are being directed toward regional sewage treatment. Overseeing these aspects of development is not extraordinarily difficult for the Planning and Development Department to do. What would be difficult for the city would be the extension of comprehensive city services over the currently developed portion of Houston's extra-territorial area.

Because Houston annexed ten-foot strips down various roads in the early 1960s, Houston's extra-territorial area extends over most of Harris County and large portions of Fort Bend, Waller, Montgomery, and Liberty counties. Within this considerable area Houston may annex contiguous areas unilaterally, and can prevent incorporation of new municipalities or annexation by other cities. Houston's extra-territorial area surrounds a number of other towns, and limits their capacity to expand beyond an already established

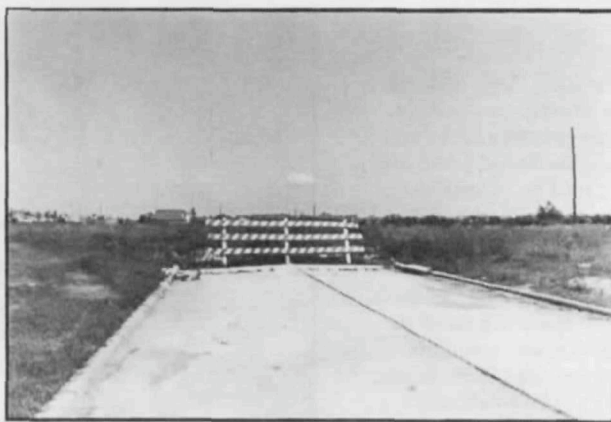
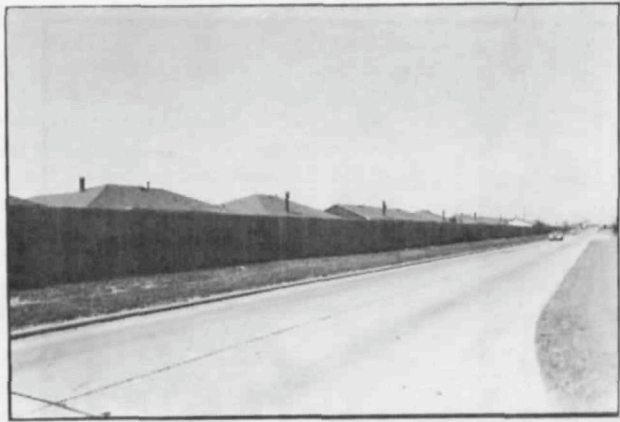
point. This means, for instance, that Houston will review plats and utilities for development west of Katy, northwest of Waller, northeast of Humble, or even southwest of Sugar Land. The prospects of providing services to such far-flung areas is daunting, but the magnitude of the efforts required to extend services to already developed areas is even more so. Consider, for example, that Houston's extra-territorial area covers Kingwood, The Woodlands, Mission Bend, the entire Mason Road area, FM-1960, Channelview, and points in between.

In the face of such an enormous area (some population estimates for our extra-territorial area go as high as a million people), Houston's most recent annexations seem rather small. In 1982 the city concluded some half-completed annexations in Alief and Fort Bend County, and made some small extensions of its boundaries elsewhere. The total population added was about 22,000, approximately the size of Deer Park. The 1983 annexation consisted of an uninhabited park site. The 1984 annexation added another 19,000 people to Houston. The 1977-1978 annexations of Clear Lake City, Greenspoint, most of Alief, and several thousand residents of Fort Bend County were more ambitious, and much more controversial.

Clear Lake City's story is well known by now. A bill in the Texas Legislature gave the residents of the unincorporated development of Clear Lake City the right to incorporate if Houston did not act before the end of 1977. Predictably, Houston acted, annexing the portion of the Clear Lake City Water Authority within its extra-territorial area in two actions before the end of that year. The result has been a continuing round of disputes and lawsuits. The annexation of Alief was less controversial only because residents there did not have any ambition to incorporate independently. The 1977 annexation in Alief added about half of the developed portion of the Alief Independent School District, lying east of Highway 6. Unfortunately, this half of the developed area was not a compact, discrete area. It protruded like a trailer hitch off Houston's rear bumper, skipping over some water districts, taking others, and rarely including the full length of any thoroughfare. The follow-up, in 1978, added most of the developed area east of Highway 6, but still created much confusion. The original townsites of Old Alief, for instance, was excluded, as was most of the right-of-way for Beltway 8. Large islands of unincorporated territory lay along Kirkwood, Wilcrest, and the Southwest Freeway (US-59). Emergency services were hampered by citizens' understandable confusion as to where the city left off and the Alief Volunteer Fire Department and Harris County Sheriff's Department began.



Boundaries of Houston City Council District H



From left to right: *Subdivision development along West Little York Road. Traffic barricade, Katy. The suburban frontier, Katy (Photos by Paul Hester)*

Problems caused by the haste of such annexations led the legislature to change the Municipal Annexation Act in 1979 and 1981. These changes require on-site public hearings prior to most annexations, and the development of service plans. They do not make annexation impossible, but make repetition of annexations like those in 1977 and 1978 unlikely. Annexation can continue in its current, incremental, form for some time under present conditions. The challenge will be when Houston attempts to move into areas like FM-1960, Kingwood, or Mission Bend. Annexation of these areas will require special efforts in planning and service development. The current capital improvements program, which runs through 1989, makes provision for fire-station and library sites outside the current city limits. These locations are in the State Highway 6 and Greens Crossing areas, and don't begin to cover the FM-1960, Kingwood, or Mason Road areas. The real test will come as the city projects its plans beyond 1989. Will the long-term goal of incorporating new growth into the city prevail over the short-term need to demonstrate improvement within the existing boundaries?

The assumption at City Hall is that most of our extra-territorial area eventually will be annexed. This attitude is very different from that in a city with fixed boundaries. A city which can annex shopping malls need not be as concerned about the decline of downtown retail. Such a city need not be concerned about the physical expansion of non-profit institutions reducing its tax base. The tendency of new freeways and airports to draw population

and development away from the central city need not trouble a city which can incorporate this development. While decision makers in city government in Houston are not indifferent to the potential problems of annexation, these simply do not represent the kind of life-or-death questions that they do (or did) in St. Louis or Boston. To devise policies and ordinances that apply not only to aging neighborhoods in need of sensitive, creative redevelopment, but also to rapidly growing suburbs with huge tracts of raw land under development is not easy. Accommodating both in one municipal government leads to uneasy and sometimes unhappy situations. As the examples of numerous cities across the country demonstrate, the alternatives to making that accommodation are not very attractive.

There are too many variables in the parallel development of cities to isolate a single difference, such as the ability to annex, and make a valid comparison. We might speculate however, on how Houston would be different if it had been limited to its 1950 boundaries. Simply by overlaying those boundaries on the present city we can see some important differences in the city government's ability to meet local needs.

In 1949 Houston doubled its area by annexation. It then became the 14th largest city in the nation, when the 1950 census counted just under 600,000 people in the incorporated area. (Currently, the population within the 1950 boundaries is almost 750,000, just less than half of the population within 1985 boundaries.) Neighborhoods within Houston's old

boundaries are, naturally, older. A greater percentage are deteriorated within this old boundary than in the current city limits. Office space is more heavily concentrated within the old boundaries since they contain three of the largest concentrations (downtown, Greenway Plaza, and the West Loop). However, office development has been spreading rapidly beyond these areas, to Greenspoint, Westchase, Sharpstown, and the Energy Corridor on the Katy Freeway (I-10).

Sales-tax receipts provide a quarter of the revenues available for general operations - police, fire, parks, library, health. Shopping malls are the greatest concentrations of retail space and produce large amounts of sales tax. These sources have followed higher-income population to the newer suburbs. Houston with its 1950 boundaries would have five major shopping malls within its boundaries. The Galleria would be the only one of the five not showing signs of decline. The 1984 annexation added eight malls, many of which are still expanding. Further, Houston's extra-territorial area includes one other mall and three proposed malls. In this metropolitan area, only two existing (and one proposed) malls are beyond Houston's ability to annex. Not all sales-tax revenue is derived from malls, but they serve as examples of the revenue sources annexation has provided.

Responsibility for services also comes with annexation, but the cost of services to commercial areas is more than outweighed by the revenues they generate. The same is not true of residential areas, especially because of the extensive declaration of homestead exemptions. Will Houston continue to annex residences? First, it must be said that the city is not pursuing annexation of residential areas as aggressively as in the past. Moreover, clear boundaries and coherent service plans frequently require the annexation of low-revenue areas. Finally, we have no way of knowing how long the current methods of financing local government will continue. State government gives local government the authority to tax, and can change that authority whenever it chooses. For instance, the State of Texas prefers to have local government tax directly, rather than provide state aid. If the state chooses to eliminate local sales tax and provide state aid based on population or some other formula, local government's fiscal fortunes would change radically. Some would gain; some would lose, depending on the legislature's decisions. In the absence of long-range certainty about the structure of local finances, we're better off spreading our risk, establishing a broad base which most nearly duplicates the Houston area's diversity. Annexation allows us to do this, giving us a future of uncertain geography, but healthy finances. ■



City of Houston and its extra-territorial jurisdiction, 1985 (••• indicates 1950 city limits)