

Lee P. Brown's Houston

A *Cite* Talk With the Mayor

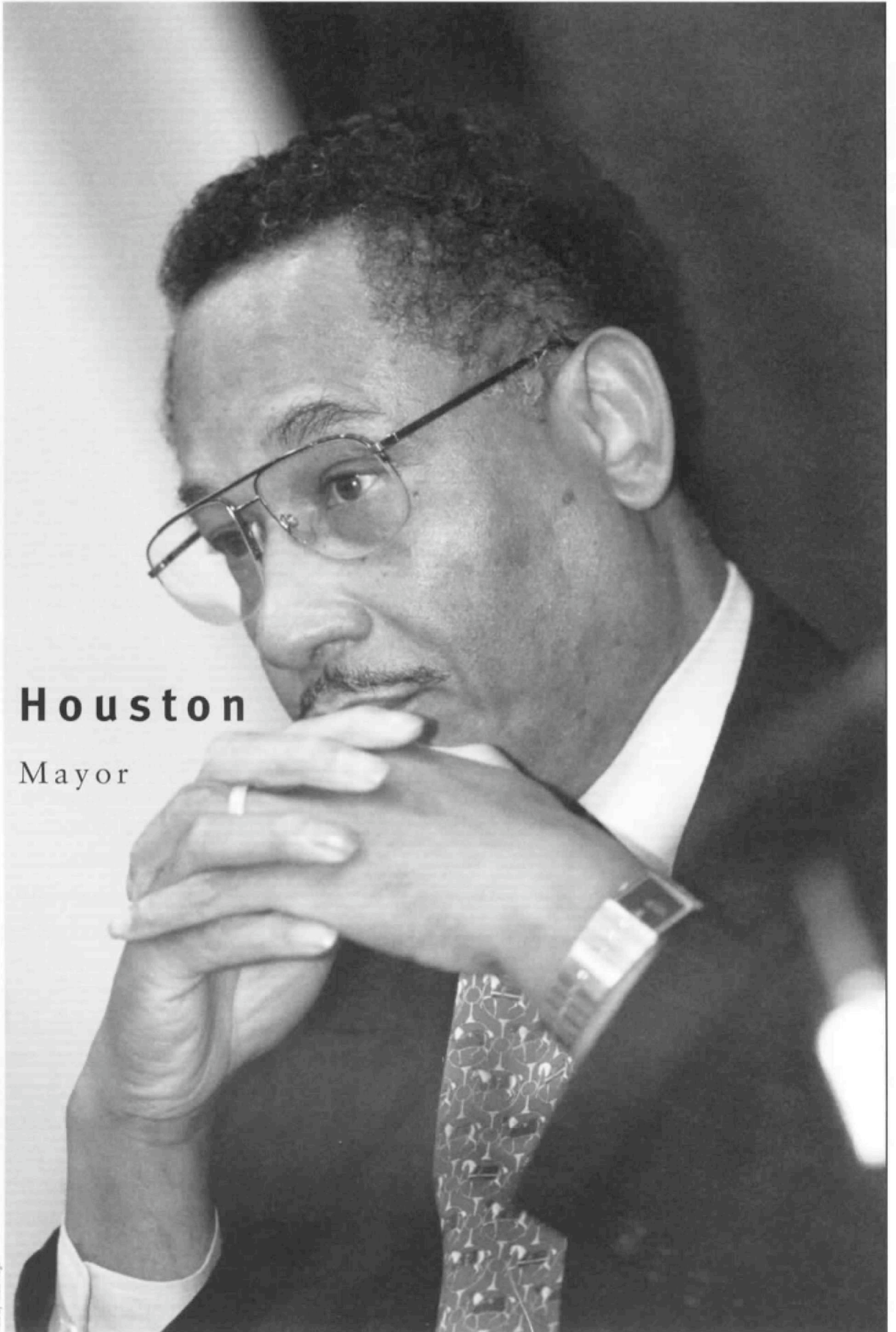


Photo by Nicole Frappé

When Lee P. Brown first moved to Houston in 1982, he was attracted by what attracts many people to the city: the offer of a job. Then-mayor Kathy Whitmire had invited Brown to be Houston's police chief, a post he held for eight sometimes contentious years. When Brown returned to Houston in 1995, after serving as New York's police commissioner and President Clinton's director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, he was also, many people thought, in search of a job, and it wasn't a position as a professor of sociology at Rice University that he was after. Though Brown taught at Rice for a while, what he had his eye on was becoming Houston's mayor. In January, following a December runoff with businessman Rob Mosbacher, he got his wish, being sworn in as the city's first African-American chief executive.

Brown, an Oklahoma-born, California-raised son of migrant farm workers, took over Houston's top position at what may well be a crucial time in the city's history. Under the business and developer friendly rule of his predecessor, Bob Lanier, Houston began a spurt of growth unseen since the height of the oil boom. Almost every part of the city can boast some form of new construction — as well as, and problematically, some form of new destruction. The building up of the new and the tearing down of the old promises to dramatically reshape the look and feel of Houston for decades to come, and much of it will happen on Lee Brown's watch.

In June, frequent Cite contributor William E. Stern and Cite managing editor Mitchell J. Shields sat down with the mayor to discuss the state of the city. The talk began with the problems and opportunities Brown sees ahead.

C Cite: The current wave of downtown and inside-the-Loop development has left some people feeling that the city is evaporating beneath them, while others, following a Houston tradition that goes back to the Astrodome and the Johnson Space Center, are celebrating what they see as Houston's next step into the future. That raises the question of just what is it that makes this city what it is. What are your feelings about Houston? What is it that grabs you, what is it that you think is important, what is it that we ought to be thinking about as we go into the next decade?

B Brown: Well, surely I think that the things we should be thinking about are the things that I'm thinking about, and

that's reflected in the priorities I've set for the city: neighborhood oriented government, preserving the neighborhoods, solving problems in the neighborhoods, forming a partnership between the city government and the people who live in the neighborhoods. All of this is designed to improve the quality of life for people who live in different neighborhoods throughout our city, whether the neighborhood is downtown, or whether it's a commercial district, or whether it's a residential district. What I'm interested in is making city government accessible to the people, and that's why I started our town hall meetings and the mayor's night in.

Second, I think we should focus on our young people, because they represent the future of the city. We need to make sure that, in the context of the neighborhood, they can get a good education and walk our streets safely, have good parks, and other things of that nature that allow children to grow up and reach their full potential.

The third thing to focus on is transportation. I see Houston, both in perception and in reality, becoming a first class, world-class city. Every world-class city I've gone to has had a world-class mass transit system. So I'm going to develop a year 2000 transportation plan that looks into the future of transportation for Houston.

Beyond that, I want to make sure that we continue our economic development, that we not only keep the ball rolling in terms of what we're doing now, but also recognize that there's an untapped potential for our city in the global marketplace. Houston could become much more of an actor in the global marketplace.

And finally, I'm interested in continuing some of the developments that we have going right now. Improving the infrastructure, continuing in terms of my concern about integrity of government, continuing in terms of just promoting our city both domestically and internationally. Those are five priorities that I have.

C Cite: To hit on one point that you mentioned, transportation: there have been complaints in the past that funding meant for Metro was being diverted in order to subsidize other city services, in particular the police. Though you've already reduced the amount of money taken from Metro, and talked about reducing this Metro subsidy even more, do you think that the use of the Metro funds for other purposes has hurt Houston's transportation picture?

B Brown: It prevented the city from having a rail system, because the decision was to instead have a bus system as the primary means of transportation. Now, there's often a misperception about using the money to fund the police; I think that happened only one year, and it was probably the right thing to do, considering where the city was at that time. Since then the money has been used for general mobility. And the law allows 25 percent of Metro funds to be used for general mobility — for streets, roads, and other things that get people around.

In fact, though my decision is to cut back on the subsidizing of other services, I still want some of that money — the city gets about \$50 million for Metro — to be used for general mobility purposes. But by the same token, I have directed Metro to take another look at rail. One of the things I think is very viable for Houston right now is to have a light rail system going from downtown out to the Medical Center and the Astrodome. We're going to be doing a study to determine what's the best way to address transportation in that corridor — we have to do a study by law in order to get federal monies — and while we can't go into the study with any preconceived notions, I can tell you that I have a bias, which is that I think it would be good for the city to have that rail system going down there.

I also think we should look at commuter rail. If we look at some of the corridors, whether it's I-10 or the West Beltway or U.S. 59 or I-45 out to Galveston, we have to look at not only what's needed now, but what we will need 15 or 20 years from now. So I see my role as not only solving the immediate problems, but also looking out for the future. If we're going to have a rail system in 15 or 20 years, we have to make that decision now. If we don't preserve the right-of-way today, it won't be possible. The decisions made a few years ago about the bus system meant that if we wanted to do a rail system right now, we couldn't, because we don't have the money. So we have to be careful about the decisions we make today so that we preserve our options.

C Cite: Is a rail system likely to be expensive?

B Brown: It doesn't necessarily have to be. We could probably do the Main Street system for \$300 million. Now, if you're going to do heavy rail, yes, that is expensive. It's very expensive in terms of the dollar per mile that it takes to build.

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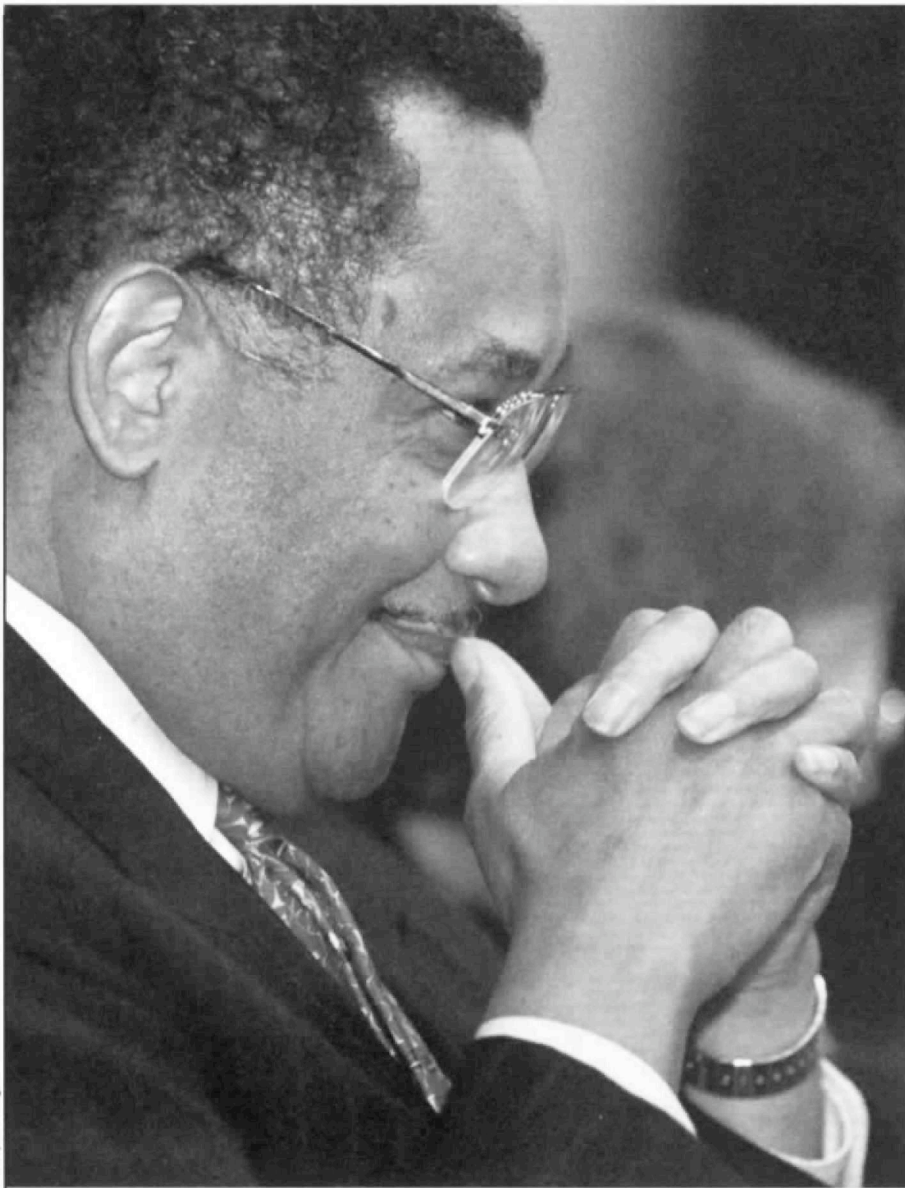


Photo by Nicole Frongé

C Cite: Does the new federal highway transportation bill include funding for rail transportation that Houston will be able to tap into?

B Brown: What that does is bring more federal funds into the state, which controls it, and what we have to do is make sure that the people in Austin give us our share. Houston does have some dedicated funds coming out of the Federal Transportation Administration, but the plan Houston is getting money for now is the better bus plan. What we've gone to Washington with are buses, and that's what they're funding. We do not have anything earmarked for a rail system. And so what we are doing is taking another look at the issue. By January 2000 I'll have a completely new transportation plan that will involve not only the city of Houston, but also the county and Metro and the state as well.

C Cite: In terms of transportation, there has been a debate about whether it's more important to make it easier to move point to point within the city or to build roads going out to the suburbs. Whether, in essence, it's better to cater to the urban or suburban traveler. That obviously affects downtown, because in one case you might want streets that are smaller and more pedestrian friendly, and in the other you might want larger thoroughfares that allow for more traffic flow. In Houston, intown residents have often complained

that the road interests ruled, and that bigger was always better, even if it disrupted neighborhoods. Where do you think the priority should be?

B Brown: I think you have to be concerned both with getting people to the city and with moving them around easily once they're here. Initially, if we want to have a successful rail system, we have to start where you have the density of the rider population, and that's Main Street.

But I also think we have to look at commuter rail, bringing people into the city, then have a means of getting them to the workplace. I can see that if we do the light rail downtown, once we get to the Astrodome there's no reason we can't then go over to the University of Houston, to Texas Southern, even out to the airport.

C Cite: Another area of concern is parks. One of the things that defines Houston is that it is so heavily forested, and tree preservation and the conservation of green space is for many a crusade. So far, you've gotten high marks from parks advocates, both with your choice of Oliver Spellman to replace Bill Smith as the director of the Parks and Recreation Department and with your expansion of the parks department's Urban Forestry Division. Could you talk a little bit about that?

B Brown: First of all, I want to develop a master plan for parks in our city, and I've given that responsibility to our new parks director. But too, I am expanding our look at our urban forests. As important as trees are to the sense of our city, we don't have a good understanding of the resource. We don't know how many trees we have, we don't know who's responsible for taking care of them. In order to get a handle on that, and make sure we keep an update on it, we have to have the resources in our Urban Forestry Division. That's the purpose of expanding in that area.

C Cite: Are they doing a survey of Houston's tree population?

B Brown: They will be doing a survey. That's in my budget right now. If we don't preserve it, we lose it, and that's the bottom line.

C Cite: The current tree ordinance protects trees that are in the right of way and also those in the building setback zone. But our understanding is that even though there is an ordinance on the books, it's been very difficult to enforce, and that

there has been a substantial loss of trees in areas that are being developed, which has created a lot of frustration.

B Brown: The ordinance is hard to enforce because we don't know a lot of things. We don't know how many trees we have, where they are. I think that part of what I'm doing with the urban forestry expansion is making sure that we do have an inventory, so we will know what we need to protect. And if anyone comes in to develop an area, we can see through the computer what we already have there.

C Cite: So all the trees that would be in the public right of way, or that would be covered by the ordinance, will in some way be recorded?

B Brown: That is correct.

C Cite: According to the Park People, some developers, even before submitting a plat, will take down a tree, and when the tree is no longer there, it doesn't have to appear on the plat. Things like that have been going on, and it's becoming something of a crisis. Is there a short-term way to address this? Because a tree survey will take a long time.

B Brown: Well, adding more resources to urban forestry helps us monitor this as well, and that's part of what we're doing.

C Cite: That leads to another issue, which is the enforcement of ordinances in general. Enforcement is the responsibility of the planning department, which shrank in size when the push for zoning failed. We've heard from some planners that the planning department simply doesn't have enough people to do its job, that it doesn't have the resources to monitor what it should be monitoring. Do you have any new plans for the department?

B Brown: I haven't heard what you're hearing. The planning director did not come to the table during the budget process saying he did not have enough people. What he asked for, and what I think is important for him to receive, is the technology to get the job done. We have a capability that we're not taking advantage of in terms of computer technology. The planning department has the responsibility now to help implement neighborhood oriented government by developing plans for every neighborhood in the city. We've created a map to show the city's identifiable neighborhoods. We're up to about 90 right now, and what we will do is develop a plan, not just for the city, but more so for the people who live in the neighborhood, and we'll

depend on them telling us what they want their neighborhood to be. Once we have that information, we can then use our resources to work with them in making sure that what they want to happen actually happens.

C Cite: How large will these neighborhoods be? Looking at your map, they seem to be very large areas, and we think sometimes of neighborhoods as much smaller entities.

B Brown: There are different ways to look at it. To come up with the neighborhoods we did an overlay of about everything you can think of: council districts, police beats, subdivisions, you name it. And the size varied. Some on our map are small, some are large. Within one of the big neighborhoods we may have smaller neighborhoods. The Heights, for example, is considered to be a neighborhood, but in the Heights you have a lot of sub-neighborhoods as well, and we've already put together a plan that recognizes more than one neighborhood in what we call the Heights.

C Cite: So what will the planning department do? What is the procedure?

B Brown: Well, first of all, it involves not just the city doing it, it involves all the people who live in the neighborhoods through their organizational representation. The planning department will be the expediter to bring everyone together, and then the people will decide what they want their neighborhood to look like in terms of the infrastructure, in terms of whatever they want. That becomes their input into city government. And then once we have a plan, it is our objective to help them implement that plan. It could be capital improvements, it could be parks, it could be you name it, whatever the neighborhood wants. So what you would have is a partnership between the neighborhoods and the city departments.

C Cite: To clarify, say you live in Meyerland; rather than coming down to City Hall with everyone else, there would be someone you know in Meyerland who would then be your conduit to City Hall?

B Brown: We would have, for lack of a better term, a neighborhood liaison for that neighborhood who knows about everything that goes on there, someone who everyone in the neighborhood knows. That person would also have contacts in city government. If there's a problem with some potholes, basically they can call this one person and he can get it

taken care of. I see our government as dealing with the problems that we're responsible for — getting the garbage picked up, taking care of the roads and parks, working on school issues, and things of that nature. But to make it easy, access becomes important. In my first town hall meeting, for example, a lady got up and said, "I've had this problem ten years." Well, it was a stoppable problem. It was a police problem, and I had my police chief there, so the problem was taken care of, because she was able to talk to someone who makes the decisions.

C Cite: Will that neighborhood liaison come out of the planning department, or are you going to set up a new department?

B Brown: I'm not creating any new bureaucracies. Planning can do what they're best at doing, which is planning, not delivering services. We have mechanisms for that, whether the issue is solid waste, public works, parks, whatever. We already have departments for that. And we already have the Mayor's Assistance Office, which provides liaisons. And that office will be broadened.

C Cite: Sometimes what a neighborhood wants is to maintain its historic appearance. But without zoning, legally there may not be much that can be done if someone wants to come in and, say, tear down a house and put up a couple of townhomes. If you were to find in going to a neighborhood that their top priority is "We want deed restrictions" or "We would like some mechanism to better preserve the quality of this neighborhood," how would you address that?

B Brown: Well, absent deed restrictions, you have a problem. We do have the mechanism to help them develop deed restrictions. Our legal department can help them accomplish that objective. And where there are deed restrictions, we help in terms of their enforcement. But our historic preservation ordinance doesn't have any teeth in it. I think we need to strengthen that ordinance, and we're taking a look at that.

C Cite: People are becoming increasingly aware of the power that ordinance could have, and the weakness it has now. What would you like it to become?

B Brown: I don't know what it should become right now, because I'm just beginning to focus on it. I do know that it doesn't accomplish what many people want, and it probably will not unless



Photo by Nicole Frapp

there's a strong political movement to make it happen. We hear people talk about archaeological and historic preservation, but there's no movement to make it happen.

C Cite: You believe this has to become more of a grassroots movement?

B Brown: Yes, I do. It has to go before City Council and get approval. It becomes a political decision at some point in time, and therefore there has to be some movement from the people to make it happen.

C Cite: But Houston has probably the weakest historic preservation ordinance to be found among the nation's major cities. Don't you think there's a way to use political leadership to speed up reforming it?

B Brown: Sure, we can do that, and that's what I'm looking at right now. Keep in mind, though, that the city has a history of growth. That's the environment that's here, and that's why I say there has to be some political movement to bring about a much stronger ordinance.

C Cite: With the destruction of Allen Parkway Village and the loss of many houses in Fourth Ward, one concern has been about affordable housing. Historically, there has been a long waiting list for public housing in Houston. Do you have any ideas on how to prevent Houston's poor from being left behind by the current boom?

B Brown: There are some things that we

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Photo by Nicole Fraga

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can control, and some we can't. We can't control private development. We can control where the city is doing something, such as in our tax increment financing districts. Fourth Ward is a good example. We will ensure that there will be affordable housing in Fourth Ward. Anyone who comes before us with a request for a TIF [tax increment financing district] must have a component of affordable housing.

C Cite: what would you consider affordable? To one person affordable housing might mean a \$150,000 house as opposed to a quarter-million-dollar house. But to people who are working on the lower end of the economic scale...

B Brown: To my mind affordable housing is not a \$150,000 house. We're trying to have something that people can afford. There are some guidelines we use that are based upon the poverty line. I don't know the exact formula off the top of my head, but it's a certain percentage of the poverty line.

I will continue to place a great emphasis on affordable housing. It is extremely important. But again, there are things we can't control. For example, we're investing in Fourth Ward, and that investment will change Fourth Ward. But we have no control over private developers coming into the areas outside of where the city is investing. They can come in and develop whatever they want to. That's the free

enterprise system. We can't make them do anything in terms of affordable housing.

C Cite: Could you expound a little bit on how your administration is investing in Fourth Ward?

B Brown: Oh, the Renaissance project out there, they're land banking, they're doing it with public funds. Then there's another group, the Fourth Ward Coalition, that's looking at development. If we put our public funds in it, then we have some say-so in terms of what the final outcome would be by mandating that you have X number or a certain percentage of affordable housing in addition to high-end housing. But also I'm going to ask City Council to approve Fourth Ward as a tax increment financing district, which then gives us control of land use in that area.

C Cite: At one time, Fourth Ward boasted the largest enclave of historic shotgun houses in an urban setting in the South, a legacy that, over the last 20 to 25 years, has slowly been destroyed. This is an important African-American neighborhood that has deteriorated, and there's a sense in some circles that in the past the city almost promoted the loss of some of this property because the land, sitting on the doorstep of downtown, was so valuable. And then there was the destruction of Allen Parkway Village. This seems to be a very sad story. There are a lot of people who are concerned about what will happen to Fourth Ward as a neighborhood. It seems to be on the verge of being lost. How do you feel about that?

B Brown: Well, a couple of observations. I've been in those homes, and the people there should not have to live in the conditions they live in. There's nothing desirable about those shotgun homes if you've ever been inside of them. We've been trying to build affordable housing in this city ever since I've been here. We now have the opportunity to do that. The big problem is, what happens outside of the zones that the city can control? There's nothing that the city can do in terms of telling home builders what they can do with their money. This is a free enterprise system, pro growth, but in the areas we're putting together as tax increment financing districts, then we do have control in terms of how the land is used.

C Cite: There have been other cities that have instituted programs of restoring these kind of houses. I understand their condition now is appalling, but Houston

On the Rail Track



When the Rice Design Alliance held its "Re: Rail" Fireside Chat on May 14, who showed up was as meaningful as what was said. The panel assembled for a public discussion of rail as a possible element of Houston's mass transit included one guest that, a year before, few people would have expected to see in such a group: the city's mayor.

Of course, the year before the mayor had been Bob Lanier, who was outspoken in his opposition to commuter rail. This time the mayor was Lee Brown, who, until this point, had been ambivalent on the subject. In the weeks following the Fireside Chat, Brown would make it clear that his ambivalence had given way to enthusiasm for a light rail demonstration project running down Main Street, but when he was invited to participate in the RDA event his position was still largely unknown.

Still, says Rafael Longoria, an associate professor of architecture at the University of Houston and, along with state representative Jessica Farrar, one of the main organizers of "Re: Rail," the moment the idea of having a Fireside Chat on rail and mass transit surfaced in an RDA program committee meeting, it was decided that the mayor should be part of the package. "Since Lanier was gone, that removed a psychological block, and we were, so to speak, back on track to consider [rail] as an option," Longoria says, adding that the RDA had hoped that Brown would

could come forward with a program, as other cities have done.

B Brown: We do that, and we're doing that in some parts of Fourth Ward, but some of those houses are not restorable. Again, I think you have to go there and do what I've done, walk through some of those places and see the deplorable conditions that people are living in. And we have absentee landlords; they recognize the value of that property, and that's why they didn't do anything to take care of it for years and years and the houses have deteriorated, in a lot of respects have

use the Fireside Chat to “officially communicate how he felt about rail.”

Mayor Brown did just that, making it clear that he would like to see a light rail system running out of downtown in the direction of the Medical Center and the Astrodome by 2005. The other panelists — Farrar, Longoria, Metro chairman Robert Miller, sociologist Stephen Klineberg, and former Dallas Area Rapid Transit chair Kathy Ingle — were equally enthusiastic about rail’s possibilities, resulting in less of a debate over rail’s pros and cons than a laying out of all the reasons why rail should be a part of Houston’s immediate future.

The 100-plus crowd who had come to Rice University’s Baker Institute to listen also seemed composed largely of rail advocates, leaving DART veteran Ingle and sociologist Klineberg as the only ones to offer up a few cautionary comments. While unwavering in her advocacy of rail, Ingle noted that 13 years had elapsed between DART’s founding and the opening of Dallas’s first light rail line, and suggested that it might be unrealistic to expect Houston to have a line in place on Main Street by 2005. She offered up a list of lessons Dallas learned in the drive for rail. First, be patient; rail can take time. Second, don’t start construction until you’ve cleared all your right-of-ways and dealt with issues of noise mitigation and the like; trying to take care of that while building a line can be expensive. Also, don’t make promises you can’t keep; overselling makes you an easy target for rail opponents. At the same time, don’t set your sights too low; in Dallas, ridership has exceeded projections. And never discount the possibility of being a victim of your own success. In Dallas, Ingle noted, once the first rail lines began running, DART was besieged by those who wanted rail out to their communities immediately. Only by having a long-term mobility plan in place, she

said, were they able to persuade people to wait their turn.

Klineberg’s cautions came only at the end, and at the specific request of moderator Jessica Farrar. Earlier, Klineberg had noted that his annual Houston Area Survey, which he began in 1982 to track Houston residents’ opinions on a variety of topics, had started to show indicators favorable to rail. A growing number of Houstonians, he said, are concerned about traffic; not since 1986 has his survey turned up so many people who consider traffic and mobility the city’s primary problem. At the same time, he added, more respondents are focused on the need for a revitalized downtown, which makes selling a downtown-oriented rail system easier.

Still, as the Fireside Chat drew to a close, Klineberg agreed to play the devil’s advocate and come up with an anti-rail argument. Houston, he said, is a city with mobility needs that won’t respond to a single fix. More alternatives are needed: better bike trails, an improved pedestrian system, intelligent street lighting to make traffic flow more efficiently, an increased emphasis on telecommuting, flexible work scheduling so that not everyone travels the streets at the same time. “There are all kinds of solutions and alternatives that keep faith with the great Houston experience,” Klineberg concluded, “which is individual choice and freedom and variety and unpredictability of the future.”

The audience applauded his quick thinking. But even the devil’s advocate, they couldn’t help but notice, hadn’t ruled rail out. He hadn’t said rail wasn’t an answer, just that it wasn’t the answer. And on that point, everyone seemed to agree.

Mitchell J. Shields

become a hazard to live in. People pay \$100, \$150 a month for rent, but it’s not a good place to live.

C Cite: What are the plans for the vacant land that was once Allen Parkway Village?

B Brown: We’re going to build more public housing there. That was always part of the plan. That’s ongoing right now. The only thing that’s been delaying it has been the finding of the remains of a grave site there.

C Cite: But the Allen Parkway Village site is being developed not just for affordable housing, but also for market housing. Correct?

B Brown: You have a mixture of homes there, which I think makes good sense. I think it was a terrible public policy that this country entered into when you put all the poor people in the same place. You should have a mixture.

C Cite: If not all those displaced units are going to be replaced with public housing, where is the affordable housing

to take their place being built?

B Brown: Most of the units are being replaced at the Allen Parkway Village site, and others are being built as affordable housing in Fourth Ward. We’ve done an inventory of everybody who’s being displaced in Fourth Ward, so we pretty well know the impact of the units that are being demolished. And there is some mechanism in place now — and that was not the case before — to insure that we do not just kick people out. That was an issue that came to the surface since I’ve been mayor. There were no plans before; now we have plans. If the city’s involved in redevelopment with public funds, then the developers must have a replacement program, must have affordable housing.

C Cite: On a different subject, Houston has some of the nation’s most prominent arts organizations. It has one of the country’s leading opera companies, a widely admired ballet, and great museums. These are all popular, and they bring in a tremendous amount of revenue. But historically the city hasn’t provided much financing for these organizations. The city has begun construction of a new baseball stadium, which is a very expensive endeavor, and yet we’ve watched as the symphony suffered through serious financial problems, and as the Museum of Fine Art builds its expansion almost solely with private funds. Do you see the city becoming more of a participant with these cultural institutions?

B Brown: The answer is yes, and let me add another dimension. The city participates much more now than is generally recognized in terms of the infrastructure for the arts in the city. Millions and millions in city funds go into the arts right now.

C Cite: You mean for the maintenance of buildings such as Jones Hall and the Wortham Center?

B Brown: Right. Here we’re talking about millions of dollars. On the hotel occupancy tax, there’s 19 percent that could go to the arts. Under the past administration that was capped at a certain amount of money. I’ve removed the cap, and they’ll be up to their full amount in about a year. The arts, in my estimation, are extremely important, not only in terms of cultural enrichment of our city, but also economically. Our city should become an arts/cultural destination, a place to which people travel because of our symphony, opera, ballet, the performing arts. We have more

theater seats here than any other city outside of New York City. That’s really a jewel in our city. So that will get more support from me.

C Cite: One final question. How do you get the public interested in planning? How do you get them involved in the idea that what happens now has results down the road, in realizing that unless you plan now, ten years from now you might look around and discover that the city you loved has disappeared and been replaced by a city that you’re not quite as fond of?

B Brown: You make the changes understandable. Conceptually, what I’m doing is what I did as police chief. I implemented neighborhood oriented policing, where we assigned the police to a neighborhood to work with the people to solve the problems. I think it’s been extremely successful, and I use as an example the fact that it has now been adopted all over America and most parts of the free world. To me, the next logical step is to have all of government do what we have the police do: Work in neighborhoods, form a partnership, solve problems in neighborhoods, and make the quality of life better. As an analogy, if I wanted to solve crime in Houston, to say I’m going to solve crime in Houston doesn’t have much meaning. I live in Meyerland, and if I want someone to solve crime in Meyerland, then I can measure the crime problem, tell you what we’re doing, and fill the void and make the difference. The same thing is true with neighborhood oriented government.

I have a chart in my office with the heading Houston Networks that shows the many structures that exist to let people know what’s happening in their city: civic associations, apartment associations, business associations, homeowner associations — they’re already out there. And then on the other hand we have the city services, what we’re delivering. If you bring those together in a manageable geographical area, and have the people having a real partnership with the city and the power to say what’s important to them, and then the city uses its resources in conjunction with the resources in the community, I think we can make a tremendous difference. ■