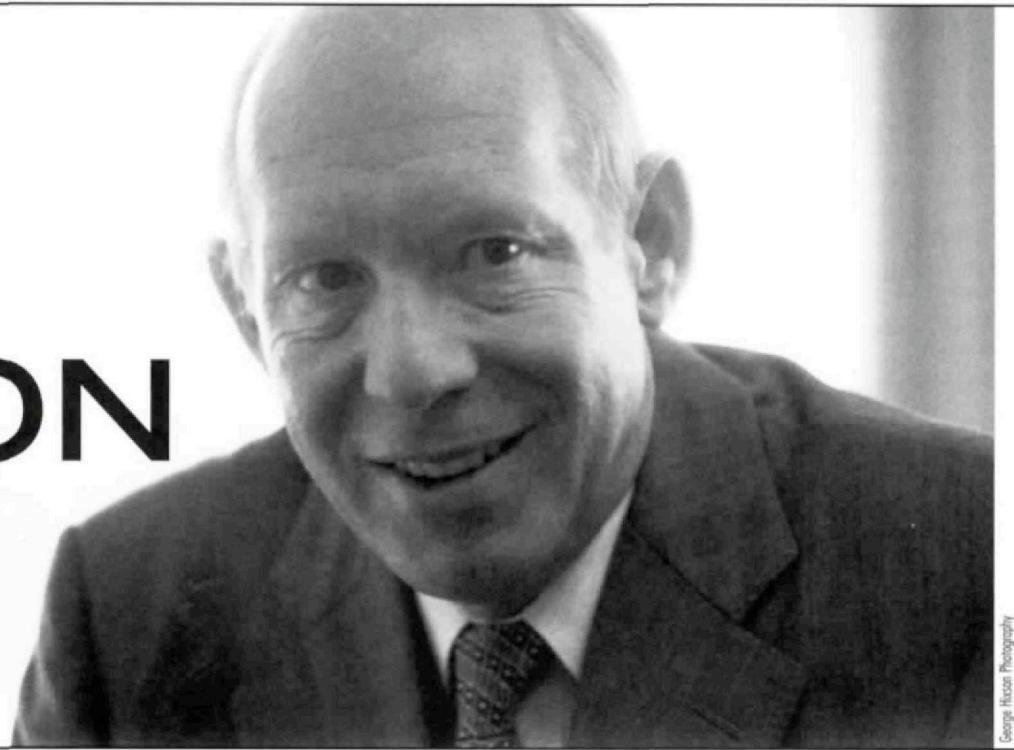


MOVING ON

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYOR BILL WHITE



George Hixon Photography

ZONING | LIGHT RAIL | NEIGHBORHOODS | PRESERVATION

In mid-December, shortly after his runoff victory over Orlando Sanchez, *Cite* sat down with Houston's then-mayor-elect Bill White. Editorial board members Barry Moore and William F. Stern, along with managing editor Lisa Gray, asked questions on a variety of subjects covering quality of life issues, public transit and traffic management, historic preservation, and delivery of city services. White's responses to these questions revealed a pragmatic approach to problem solving and an itch to begin work. The interview began and ended promptly on time. As White said in closing, "I've got to move on!"

Cite: *In 1993 a zoning referendum to establish a more comprehensive set of planning guidelines for Houston was narrowly defeated. During the intervening ten years groups such as Blueprint Houston have come forward to suggest alternative ways to implement planning guidelines. Do you have any intention of seeking ways to address the need for comprehensive planning guidelines as a replacement for the current system of ad hoc ordinances?*

Bill White: First, deed restrictions need to be enforced. We need to revitalize deed restrictions in neighborhoods where there have been claims of waivers. This is happening all over the city.

And we need to enforce the ordinances we have. We don't enforce ordinances against trucks cutting through neighborhoods, against parking. If we can't do the things that we're set up to do already, things on which we've already achieved consensus, it'll be hard to attempt something new.

I like the idea of something driven from the stakeholders up, like the Main Street Corridor, which involved citizens and businesses. We need to do a better

job on historic preservation. We need to do a better job of respecting neighborhoods that are trying to redevelop. Some of those blighted neighborhoods only receive notification after the fact that there are very high-density, low-income apartments being placed right in the middle of those neighborhoods in transition. Those things we need to do better.

So rather than talking about somebody at City Hall coming up with a vision of a city that other people live in, I'd like to do something that is based on the feedback and priorities of the neighborhoods.

Cite: *What about groups looking at planning guidelines for the city? Would you call upon those groups to help reformulate ordinances to plan Houston?*

White: The idea of Blueprint Houston is good. I was on the board before they came up with a name, when it was all competing nonprofit organizations. I supported the effort that eventually became Blueprint Houston, and attended meetings, including the organizational meeting of Blueprint Houston. At that meeting there was a person who'd led the effort in Phoenix to create urban villages. We went through Phoenix's experience with building consensus for new planning. She said — and I agree — that it's important to find some things that are not abstract, that are early deliverables, so that citizens don't feel their time is wasted.

Blueprint Houston put together a list of priorities that certainly are priorities of mine: New mass transit, better air quality. We have problems right now with inside-the-Loop neighborhoods with safety. You can have the prettiest neighborhood in the world, but if it's not safe, people won't live there.

But to tell you the truth, I've seen some list of priorities from Blueprint

Houston that emphasized the types of things that people have talked about a long time. But I have not seen specific recommendations concerning, say, how the planning department ought to work with neighborhoods, etc.

Cite: *The zoning referendum might better have been called "neighborhood preservation." Zoning is anathema in this city. Is there any way you can envision implementing what that zoning referendum was trying to establish — basic guidelines, setbacks, etc.? The reason inner-city neighborhoods are in such chaos is that there's no way to control what's going on next to you.*

White: First, I need to push back on that premise. I visited every neighborhood. In the neighborhoods that are in worst shape in our city, which encompass an enormous amount of land — the people there say, and I observed, that it's because of abandoned properties and crime. And I would say also a lack of business. It's hard for people to have affordable housing close to where they work, where they shop, where their kids go to school. Those things are eating the guts out of the neighborhoods in our city.

Those will be my highest priorities: transportation, neighborhood safety, cleaning up the neighborhoods, enforcing the ordinances that we have, improving air quality, improving drainage — that has become a nightmare. If I make progress on those things, on which right now we have a consensus, I will have made a lot of progress.

Redoing some battle on neighborhood planning or zoning is not as high on the radar screen. Talking to the civic clubs, I hear there are things already on the books about public nuisances that are not enforced. They say, how is it that a

building gets permitted in violation of deed restrictions? Those things are what people are interested in.

Cite: *Given the scope of public works projects currently underway, and the criticism the prior administration received specific to this department, what initiatives will you take immediately to improve the department of public works? This question also goes to another perceived problem: Buildings in the city are generally mediocre, without architectural distinction. The selection process considers lots of criteria, none of which get at design excellence.*

White: When we speak about the public works department, most of what that does is roads and streets and drainage. So maybe I'll say something that refers to Public Works, but especially with emphasis on what is now Building Services. The essential elements of reform have been identified. I have already received a confidential report. First, we need to depoliticize the process of selecting vendors and the like. Second, we need to have leadership which can build a public works department which is considered the most professional in the nation. I think it can be done within a period of years. Third, we need to make sure we have the right skill mix. We need to have the right type of people. For example, it takes somebody who's designed something to be a knowledgeable consumer of design. This is true whether it be a water tank, freeway, or a building. As to the specific issue you raise, I agree that there is a very, very high return on designing buildings with excellence, and I think that ought to be a commitment.

Cite: *In the days before term limits, many councilmembers became experts on (and champions of) certain areas, such as*

Eleanor Tinsley on parks. Is it possible with term limits for this kind of leadership to evolve again?

White: I think it is. Part of it is that if you elect people to council who are civic leaders before they get there, they're more likely to be civic leaders after they get there. It's like picking stocks. People tend to remember the ones they make money on and forget the ones they lose [money on]. When I first moved to Houston, some people were doing you a favor to

even if we were to add more park green space, which I want to do, we can't maintain what we currently have. You remember when McGregor Park was going to be taken back because the city couldn't maintain it. We can't maintain what we have. The neighborhood parks are not well maintained. Contrast McGregor Park to Memorial Park. We need to do something to McGregor Park in terms of maintenance, upkeep, physical appearance, etc. My first priority is to try to get more

historic preservation. Parts of the Third Ward would be suitable for development guidelines that are community-based and stakeholder-driven. The Third Ward, which is at-risk as far as the character of the neighborhood, will be changed by what we do with abandoned properties or properties that are bought by speculators. How do we encourage revitalization of the area, but do so in a way that does not drive out people who live there because of higher property values?

room window.] Eureka Junction is about a mile and a half that way. You know what that is? It's where the rails in the middle of the United States came together at a big rail head. There were rail junctions in the St. Louis area, the Chicago area, and the Houston area "where 14 rails met the sea."

One of the rail lines came down the Katy Freeway. One of them came down from Navasota and to the north. Another one — the one that comes up from Sugar Land, I don't know

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meet with you. It didn't matter what you thought, they were going to be in there forever. Some sorts of term limits are good, but what the limits should be — there's a lot of discussion about that.

Cite: *Some people have said that the term of office for a mayor — two years — is too brief. The first year you're getting used to it, the second year you're running for mayor again. Is that anything you're thinking about?*

White: It would be crazy for the city council or me to start extending their own terms. On a personal note, six years sounds like a long time. I love this city and want to make a contribution, but ...

I think that is something that a lot of knowledgeable people are discussing, whether it should be extended from two to four. You could do it in a way that didn't apply to anybody currently holding office. I think there would need to be some consensus about that. There's going to be enough controversial issues: transportation, air quality, reforming the way we do business, drainage, public safety. I'm going to have my hands full with those things.

Here's a quality of life issue. Libraries and parks have typically been at the bottom of every city budget in terms of priorities. Since they're intimately involved in quality of life, how would you give them priority?

I want to make sure that money we spend right now is well spent. We have 900 people working in the city parks department. We have lots of people working in the county parks. At the county parks less money is spent, and the county parks are better maintained. I don't know why 900 people can't maintain our parks, to tell you the truth — and do even more. But the widespread perception is that

bang for the buck out of the substantial amount of money we spend. We spend \$50 million on parks, and I want to be sure we get \$50 million in results.

Cite: *Houston is the only major city in America without an effective ordinance for the preservation of historic structures and neighborhoods. Though a preservation ordinance does exist, the law is currently written only to delay the demolition of designated historic structures for a period of 90 days. There is nothing to prevent an historic building's destruction. How will you deal with the ineffectiveness of Houston's preservation ordinance?*

White: I think it's very important that we do so. I want to get clear direction about the type of balance that I want to see, and then see if a number of citizens representing different interests can come up with a consensus. If there's any group — I don't care who it is — who says my way or no way, I don't consider that to be constructive. The direction which we had is based on, from what I've heard, on what other cities did right and wrong. Let's identify what we consider to be the first 50, 70, or 80 historically significant structures and come up with something that provides for those structures. In some cases it may be a neighborhood or a group of structures in a neighborhood that operates together. But if we can't do that, we won't make progress anyway.

I consider it to be a bit of a crisis in the sense that there are historical neighborhoods — Third Ward, to give an example — which are under attack, losing their distinctive historical structures and losing the character of those neighborhoods.

I don't think [saving neighborhoods is] done through historic preservation. Part of it, but only part of it, is through

Cite: *There's a great development opportunity associated with METRO light rail.*

White: Probably it's a great opportunity. I consider that one of the tougher issues. I support rail. The natural tendency is to bring in high-density, often upscale development and businesses right along those rail lines. That's one of the advertised benefits of rail. But it does destroy neighborhoods. So let's be plain and blunt about what happens when that occurs. And so deal with those neighborhoods. Some people say, "It doesn't destroy neighborhoods, it improves them." But it depends on whether you've lived there 40 or 50 years, and what you like. It's a tough issue. But it's an issue we're going to confront.

Cite: *Do you have plans to promote a true commuter rail system to the far suburban communities?*

White: I'd like it to be done. That's one reason it's important that we got the METRORail referendum passed, because if you have commuter rail dumping people going to multiple employment centers, you need something to get them to those places of employment. This can be done in parallel with, or as a next stage to, a rail system, along the lines of the one proposed by METRO as the next phase. It can't be done before that. Otherwise you have circulation problems.

The real problem with congestion in Houston isn't the inner city. It's the congestion coming in. The light rail system doesn't address that. But as the population grows rapidly, shouldn't we be planning now? This is one of the easiest cities in the world to implement rail because the geography is so forgiving and we have existing right of ways.

[White points out the conference-

where it originates — goes through Memorial Park, through the Amtrak station, and out to Florida. Right there. That junction.

I've talked to owners of the rail line up 290. It needs to be renovated, but that's a place you could put commuter rail.

Cite: *What are your thoughts about expansion of the Katy Freeway? The strategy of adding more lanes seems increasingly controversial. You can never build enough lanes....*

White: I think the highest value of the mayor — this is going to require discipline and understanding — is to talk about where we can have a significant impact on what happens in the future. There's a lot of things where a billion dollars in contracts are already negotiated, where port battles have been fought, where things in the planning phase for ten years have been constructed. I don't try to redo everything that's already initiated. It may be that Katy is in that situation.

I have taken a look in general. We need to submerge these freeways. We ought to put the freeways below grade. That should be a standard design feature of the freeway redesign.

But what I'm focused on right now, with Katy and Kirby under construction, is what do we do to mitigate what will begin on US 59? How do we avoid some of this happening in the future, where lack of coordination of projects has [construction projects] starting at the same time, with citizens getting involved in the process late in the game both because of the TXDOT culture and because citizens have day jobs and focus on these things.

I've got to move on. Thank you. ■