



BREAKING DOWN WALLS: TAKING STOCK OF THE HOUSTON 2040 TALKS

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HOUSTON MIGHT BE THE QUIRKIEST, MOST mixed up and oftentimes unnerving city in the United States. It is one of the largest cities in the country both in terms of sheer size and population and has no zoning and only limited planning. It is one of our most demographically diverse cities—even more so than New York. And it is in the heart of one of our continent's most extraordinary and fragile ecosystems which contains hardwood and evergreen forests, inland and coastal prairies, marshes, swamps, bayous, and river plains.

In short, Houston is full of challenges and treasures, but the intensity of its diversity and the helter-skelter arrangement of its resources can tend to highlight the problems and obscure the benefits to living here. Such a landscape naturally provides fertile ground for organizations and citizens to positively impact our community through advocacy and regular civic engagement. Like most other metropolitan areas around the country, however, all too often the citizens who are willing to get out and make a difference tend to define their interests and activities in very narrow categories such as environmentalists, planners, conservancies, and transit lovers. Even in the most progressive of cities, such rigid delineations negatively cut short opportunities for collaboration and mutual support toward what is ultimately the goal of all the different interest groups—making our home a better, cleaner, safer, more enjoyable place to live.

In January 2010, several organizations in the Houston area had the idea of breaking down those walls and building support, awareness, and camaraderie through the very Texas pastime

of having a beer and shooting the breeze. Every month, Air Alliance Houston, Houston Tomorrow, the Citizens' Transportation Coalition, and Social Agency Lab have jointly organized an informal meeting where all of the supporters of our various organizations are invited to come hear about what is happening in our greater community.

We call this meeting My Houston 2040. As it started in 2010, we wanted to frame the entire conversation not in terms of how we can improve city planning ordinances, choose better bus lines, or reduce levels of particulate matter, but rather how we all collectively want our community to evolve over the next three decades into a better place for all. Every month we invite two speakers, the first of which gives a topical presentation on a project or initiative that is relevant to making our city a better place. Over time, the conversation has evolved to cover all types of issues relating to urban life in Houston, from the arts to restaurants to music to transit.

The second speaker every month is a notable Houstonian who is asked to answer three questions: What do you think Houston will be like in 2040? What do you want Houston to be like in 2040? What do you think we need to do to make Houston like you want it to be in 2040?

The best answers to these questions have come from speakers who truly engage with their current efforts and how they should positively impact a larger vision for our home in the future.

The impact of hearing different Houstonians speak on their visions for the future of Houston is to see the cultural shift occurring in the city. Month after month, the diversity of those who

are remaking the city, with infrastructure and culture, is truly staggering.

Some of the best speakers over the past couple of years have dealt with an issue that is coming to a pinnacle of importance this fall in the Houston area—transit. Current METRO CEO George Greanias, who opted to engage with our questions and the audience in an almost improv style, spoke from the heart and from his experience about how the choices we make right now will have a decades-long impact on our community's future and growth as well as the health and happiness of the people who reside here.

My Houston 2040 has showcased projects that are completely reconstructing huge sections of our city in an effort to encourage density and sustainability followed the next month by projects which guide Houstonians on walking tours through historic though under-appreciated neighborhoods. We have talked about development of parks one month and next dealt with the frustration of living in a place where officials have little power to regulate businesses which negatively impact the health and environment of their local community. We've learned about Galveston Bay and the health of the waters and marshes that define us as a coastal community. Michael Skelly explained why Texas has an abundance of wind energy but why the nation as a whole has a huge problem in taking advantage of such power. Omar Afra talked about stamping out the child sex trade. We heard about efforts to create an artist community using repurposed shipping containers on Buffalo Bayou and have learned from Bob Sanborn and Natasha Kamrani about the reality of receiving a basic education in Houston. City Council Member Stephen Costello argued the necessity of the City's "flood" tax and Stephen Klineberg updated us on his Houston Area Survey. We've discussed the impact of global climate change on our region and learned how to use a balloon and a digital camera to map things such as a landfill. The subjects and visions, themes and aspirations run the gamut of possibilities, typifying the diversity that a Houstonian would expect to hear.

My Houston 2040 averages between forty and fifty attendees every month. What is more important is that on average about half of those attendees are there for the first time. Some are wearing suits and have obviously just cruised down Allen Parkway to Montrose from their office downtown. Others show up with their cuffs tucked and shirts wet with sweat from the bike ride across the bayou from the Heights. Houston can be a difficult place to learn and to love, but is also a fascinating and rewarding community in which to work, live, and grow. Our audience composition speaks to a desire in Houstonians—new arrivals and lifelong residents—to find out more and be a part of making this an even greater place to live. It's our hope that My Houston 2040 gives our fellow Houstonians the chance to celebrate our diversity, face our challenges, and make our home a more enjoyable place for us all. **c**