Dear Chair and Board Members,

The West Houston Association’s Board of Directors and Regional Mobility Committee believe that METRO*Next* provides for a great discussion about Houston’s transit future. Houston cannot build roads wide enough to accommodate the population increases likely to come to the region over the next 25 years. Consistent with the [West Houston 2060 Plan](http://www.westhouston2060.org/), the WHA Regional Mobility Committee respectfully submits the comments below with the hope that transit in our region is at least as successful as we need it to be.

1. ***Connecting Centers***: The METRONext Plan will provide excellent connections from various job centers and suburban regions to downtown. However, the plan will do little to connect these job centers and suburban regions to each other. Significantly more total jobs are in the Energy Corridor, Westchase, and Memorial Management Districts than in the Central Business District. The population of Greater West Houston will increase by almost 1 million by 2045 for a total of 2.89 million residents. A significant majority of Greater West Houston residents will work outside of downtown. METRONext’s focus on the central business district will lengthen commute times for riders and drivers. For instance, getting to the airport by bus from anywhere in West Harris County requires a trip downtown. The net result is more car trips along the region’s ring roads and major highways. Some proposed BOOST/BRT routes, such as the route on Gessner, benefit current local riding populations but without acknowledging likely impediments to plans or addressing current and future needs of unserved populations. Grand Parkway and I-10 is an emerging center that that will continue to grow and densify. Additional thought needs to be given how this center will connect with other centers. *METRONext* should also consider improving service north of I-10 along increasingly dense major thoroughfares, such as FM 1960/TH 6, should be added.
2. **West Belt Connector**: Many of the transit demands in Greater West Houston that are overlooked in the METRO*Next* Plan could be serviced with a West Belt Regional Connector that stops at existing and proposed transit centers. Service along Beltway 8 from I-69 to I-45 and IAH would work with current and proposed park and ride facilities, reduce transfers, boost ridership (especially when coupled with mini-transit centers), and decrease trip times. The BRT route along Gessner would likely serve populations only inside the Beltway—only at one point does service on this route connect to Beltway 8. Service along other portions of ring roads, such as the Grand Parkway, should also be considered.
3. ***Mini-Transit Centers***: Getting people out of their cars requires getting bus facilities closer to where they live. “Mini-transit centers” that connect to larger transit centers and park and rides in North and West Harris County would significantly improve transit service and traffic flow on county roads. Mini-transit centers could start with “tactical urbanism” approaches, utilizing existing parking facilities. Working with developers, business owners, and institutions to create transit facilities and services that appeal to riders/customers can reduce METRO’s costs and create win-win-win scenarios. For instance, Houston Community College is very interested in a transit center at its Spring Branch Campus that could connect with Memorial and Spring Branch Management District destinations. Many community college campuses and retail centers would make ideal locations for mini-transit centers.
4. ***Partnerships & Service:*** METRO*Next* retains a relatively traditional approach to transit service. METRO should consider more innovative service and perhaps let the private sector provide METRO-type services where consumers are willing to pay for a higher level of service or where it would cost more for METRO to provide service. Partnering with Uber, Lyft, and other transportation services could help people access transit, increase reliability, and save taxpayers money. METRO can layer uses of its transit facilities through public-private partnerships to create revenue and increase the attractiveness, usefulness, and comfort-level of its facilities, all with minimal public investment. We also believe that METRO should concentrate on working with willing private partners rather than using eminent domain. Partnerships with adjacent counties, such as Fort Bend County, can ensure the most effective and cohesive planning for our region and increase METRO’s ridership.
5. ***High Capacity*:** METRO*Next* devotes significant planning and funding resources to light rail, which has few advantages and several disadvantages compared to other high-capacity options in Houston’s contexts. Light rail is significantly more expensive and less flexible than bus-rapid transit (BRT) and MAX lanes and subject to legacy issues that other transit options avoid. MAX lanes provide transit benefits and can also accommodate freight and non-transit vehicles (especially automated vehicles) when excess capacity is available. Directing planning and funding away from light rail and towards transitions from limited service to BOOST to BRT would allow METRO to accomplish more, more quickly, and with more flexibility. BOOST lines should coordinate (as opposed to preempt) signals to preserve an acceptable level of traffic service, which will help diffuse opposition to transit, allowing for more transit growth.