

Wulfe, Relyea: Mobility upgrades needed to protect Uptown's vibrancy

By Ed Wulfe and Tim D. Relyea

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Uptown Houston is known internationally as a standard-bearer for what can be accomplished with vision, determination and the hard work of various entities to collectively better their community. As the result of masterful private-public partnerships, this area is one of Houston's greatest economic drivers and an extraordinary example of a vibrant people-place to work, live and experience a special and appealing lifestyle.

What began as a suburban shopping mecca is now an urban community characterized by offices, retailers, residences, hotels and restaurants, all thriving in a beautiful, extensively landscaped setting. There are now more than 80,000 Uptown-area employees and more than 180,000 residents in a three-mile area. New development calls for 1.2 million square feet of office space, 5,000 new residential units and 700,000 square feet of retail.

Uptown is by design a powerful Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) contributing mightily to the Greater Houston economy. Consider that last year Uptown generated \$3.6 billion in retail sales, and \$300 million in hotel room revenue with \$1.8 billion of new development is currently under construction. Fully one-third of the TIRZ revenue, \$11 million in cash, goes to affordable housing for the city over a 12-month period.

As Uptown prospers, so does the city of Houston. This explains the unanimous City Hall approval of Uptown Houston's plan and budget, which addresses infrastructure and traffic concerns as well as the continued enhancement of the area. These Uptown initiatives are fully vetted public-private partnerships designed for future growth, success and mobility.

With Uptown's phenomenal growth, getting to, from and through the area is an increasingly difficult and growing challenge. Many commuters, as well as visitors are major contributors to West Loop traffic congestion, the most congested freeway in the state. According to TxDOT, with more than 300,000 vehicles traveling the nearly four-mile West Loop stretch every day, 1.2 million hours are annually wasted in delay for each mile.

Uptown's Capital Improvement Plan includes core mobility projects for area streets and improvement projects for Memorial Park. It also includes the Uptown dedicated bus lanes (Uptown DBL) project, a regional system designed to connect workers to Uptown via Houston's highly successful HOV network. Integral to this initiative is the redevelopment of Post Oak

Boulevard with dedicated bus lanes which will effectively take cars off the West Loop, Post Oak Boulevard, San Felipe, Westheimer and Richmond. The Uptown DBL strategically interconnects with Metro's local bus network, ensuring that the entire Houston community has effective and convenient access to Uptown.

The appointed board and dedicated staff of Uptown have been working diligently toward this mobility improvement solution for years. With these enhancements, we ensure the area is competitive commercially in the future.

Post Oak Boulevard will continue to be the iconic thoroughfare Houstonians know and love. The stainless steel rings at major intersections, the striking arches and the seasonal flowers will remain. Sleek modern buses will traverse the boulevard under a canopy of more than 1,000 oak trees. There will continue to be six lanes on Post Oak Boulevard with left turn lanes adding to driving convenience and safety. Traffic signals will be synchronized and monitored to ensure traffic flow.

Working alongside elected and appointed governmental officials, residential and commercial property owners, tenants and other regional stakeholders, Uptown strives to ensure their concerns are heard, and that all constituents are informed and updated on the project plans. To date, hundreds of documented public meetings have been conducted. As in the past, Uptown will continue to be transparent in its sincere desire to serve the needs of the immediate community.

Uptown is acknowledged as one of the world's most successful mixed-use environments. Equal weight is given to residential, commercial and retail offerings in an environment that affords a desirable address for leading corporations, cosmopolitan retailers, fine hotels and urban residents. Progress and change cannot happen without complexity and the many challenges that go along with it. We all share a vested interest in the success of Uptown, from the city to Uptown workers and residents, to the public that enjoys the area's amenities. It's time for all of us to get on board.

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