MOBILITY HOUSTON

FINDINGS REPORT
Glasshouse Policy removes the gap between citizens and policymakers, creating a more engaged citizenry and a more responsive and representative government. By acting as a forum for the general public, policymakers, academics, and all other interested stakeholders to debate, compromise, and ultimately craft crowdsourced policy solutions to the major issues the public faces today, Glasshouse Policy engages new ideas, new voices, and new constituencies on critical community issues.
**GLASSHOUSE POLICY**

**WOULD LIKE TO THANK OUR PARTNERS**

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Our Process

MobilityHouston is a privately-funded online and in-person platform for all Houstonians to explore, discuss, and debate the challenges and policies impacting Houston mobility. The initiative invites the public, local community leaders, regional transportation thought leaders, and regional employers to take part in a conversation focused on turning citizen-sourced priorities into effective policy solutions.

Step 1: Community Engagement

MobilityHouston was divided into five topics, commuting, public transit, growth, infrastructure, and big ideas. Each of these topics featured a pinned post by a community leader or stakeholder organization and discussed by the greater MobilityHouston community.

Step 2: In Person Discussions

Throughout the MobilityHouston initiative, we paired the online discussions with in-person engagement events. Hosting several City Council members, mobility leaders and professionals, these events allowed the greater Houston community to interact directly with policymakers.

Step 3: Collect Data & Publish Results

The final step in the MobilityHouston process is this report. Produced by Glasshouse Policy in conjunction with community partners and stakeholders, this report is a glimpse inside the MobilityHouston process, detailing its participation, findings and priorities, as generated by the community.

How to read this report:

This report just scratches the surface of the wide array of mobility conversations taking place in the Houston area. It is a look inside the community and its priorities and sets the stage for future mobility discussions.
Audience Overview
Glasshouse Policy analyzed a six days’ worth of activity of thousands of individuals active on social media that had Houston mobility top of mind based on social conversation as part of a larger examination of the Houston mobility dialog. MobilityHouston is a community engagement initiative sponsored by both public and private community partners to create and shape public policy solutions to Houston’s transportation woes.

5078
Total number of mentions in the Houston audience sample that mentioned “traffic” on Twitter.
### Top keywords and terms used by MobilityHouston audience when discussing transportation and mobility

#### "Transit"
- Add walkability
- quality transit
- METRORail
- delays on HOV/mainlanes
- public comment
- delay
- transit center
- bond
- referendum
- commuter rail

#### "Commute"
- accident
- I-10 East
- Inbound commute
- reverse commute
- afternoon commute
- drive times
- Pearland
- Woodlands
- Humble
- katy fwy

#### "Bus"
- my bus is late
- changing bus times
- Woodlands
- collision
- bus stop
- riding the bus
- bus times
- miss the bus
- ISD
- long bus ride

#### "Cycling" or "Bicycle"
- cycling and trails
- morning ride
- protected cycleways
- fitness
- cycling gear
- healthcare

#### “Sidewalk” or “Sidewalks”
- street art
- sidewalk repair
- closed sidewalk
- sidewalks lead to nowhere
- ADA compliance
- sidewalk obstructions

#### "Transportation"
- Add walkability
- quality transit
- METRORail
- delays on HOV/mainlanes
- public comment
- delay
- transit center
- bond
- referendum
- commuter rail
1. MAKE SIDEWALKS A PRIORITY TO IMPROVE WALKABILITY

2. REVAMP THE COMMUTER RAIL DISCUSSION

3. ELIMINATE PARKING MINIMUMS THROUGHOUT THE CITY

4. APPROVE THE BIKE MASTER PLAN

5. IMPLEMENT DYNAMIC TOLL PRICING
MAKE SIDEWALKS A PRIORITY TO IMPROVE WALKABILITY

Background

In a city known for its size and sprawl, supplying, maintaining and connecting sidewalks and other pedestrian facilities is a challenge. While all 627 square miles of Houston cannot become an exemplar of urban walkability overnight, the desire for a more walkable Houston exists. The 2016 Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey reported that 43% of respondents want to live in a more walkable community.

In the City of Houston, the repair, replacement, and maintenance of sidewalks falls on the property owners. The strategic planning and construction of new sidewalks are largely conducted within specific management districts. In 2015, City Council passed two ordinances to lessen the burden of repairing sidewalks placed on property owners. The ordinances waived the permitting fee for property owners and established a Privately-Funded Sidewalk Program.

Sidewalks play a large role in an area’s overall mobility. For instance, walkability affects transit usability, as the overwhelming majority of transit riders typically walk to transit stops. As a result, a neighborhood that isn’t walkable is also less transit friendly. Additionally, walkable cities also produce measurable quality of life improvements. People who live in neighborhoods with sidewalks are more likely to live an active lifestyle, with demonstrable benefits to both physical and mental well being.

Political activity, such as Mayor Parker's Executive Order to develop a Complete Streets and Transportation Plan in 2013, and the work of advocates such as the Houston Complete Streets Coalition, continues to increase the potential of improved walkability in Central Houston.

What's happening now

With a growing expectation and prioritization of connected communities in Houston, stakeholders continue to emphasize pedestrian facilities.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) has made progress in identifying actionable steps to improve local walkability through their Livable Centers Program. The program conducts studies within local communities to identify specific action items, such as the development of bike-lanes and sidewalk infrastructure, to maximize walkability in the area. The Livable Centers Program has made progress in making Houston more walkable, and demonstrates the economic value of walkable neighborhoods. The implementation of the recommendations from the Livable Centers Studies saw average property values increase 66% and job growth increase 17%.

What you can do

AARP provides a variety of resources for communities and individuals to advocate for better sidewalk infrastructure. Additionally, AARP provides toolkits to conduct independent assessments of the walkability in your neighborhood.

There are also outstanding, citizen-led advocacy groups in Houston to join, such as the Complete Streets Coalition or the Citizens’ Transportation Coalition.
There is no way the city can keep up with growth by building more roads. We've tried that and it didn't work. I think we should focus on expanding the rail to outskirts of city.

Popular Idea #2

REVAMP THE COMMUTER RAIL DISCUSSION

Background
A typical commuting service in Northern U.S. cities, like Chicago, commuter rail focuses on relatively long trips for transit, providing service from outlying suburbs to the Central Business District.

While in recent years light rail has become a core aspect of Houston's public transit system, METRORail service does not expand beyond downtown and the immediate surrounding areas.

In 2011, METRO began evaluating the feasibility of a commuter rail known as the US90A/Southwester Rail Corridor. However, METRO placed the rail project on hold in 2012. Additionally, H-GAC conducted a commuter rail mobility study in 2008. The study investigates the feasibility, accessibility, and connectivity requirements of a potential regional commuter servicing the counties of the H-GAC region. Ultimately the study concluded that such a system could play a critical role in Houston’s growing regional multi-modal infrastructure.

What's happening now
Since taking office, Mayor Sylvester Turner has consistently emphasized the need for a transportation paradigm shift in Houston. Proponents of this paradigm shift argue Houston cannot continue to rely on building new roads to solve its congestion issues.

The desire for mobility solutions beyond roads has reinvigorated the discussion of a commuter rail. In July 2016, METRO board approved a resolution to restart the funding process. The resolution allows for METRO to seek funding for the project from the Federal Transit Authority.

What you can do
Advocate and support rail policy via collective action. Also, METRO invites feedback on all their programs year round.
Popular Idea #3

Houston needs to do away with minimum parking standards and let the market decide how much parking they need.

ELIMINATE PARKING MINIMUMS THROUGHOUT THE CITY

Background
Despite the lack of comprehensive zoning, Chapter 26 Article VIII of Houston’s Municipal Code requires all development to meet a minimum parking requirement. A traditional feature of land-use and development codes across the country, parking minimums enforce construction of parking spaces for all developments depending on a variety of factors.

Cities often require parking minimums in the hope that by requiring new development to include parking, the parking will adequately accommodate new growth in the future. However, parking minimums often lead to the overdevelopment of parking spaces and render valuable property unavailable for further development. Parking requirements create barriers for new developments in high density areas due to the added cost of land required to accommodate the parking minimums.

Underlining the negative impact of parking minimums, a recent report by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy finds parking minimums encourage individuals to use single-occupancy vehicles, causing congestion even in areas of low-density development.

What’s happening now
City Officials are currently reviewing two pilot projects aimed at reducing the City’s parking problems.

The first pilot project aims to leverage existing parking Downtown by directing people to available off-street parking facilities. The second plan hopes to encourage car-sharing in Midtown by designating parking spaces as car-share only.

What you can do
Contact Houston City Council members and other political leaders about changing parking requirements. You can find your City Council Member here.
Pass the Houston Bike Plan and begin implementing short term projects, policies and key connections. Building these trails, lanes and safer streets would triple our comfortable bikeway network – and start to create the fabric needed to get people out walking and bicycling.

APPROVE THE BIKE MASTER PLAN

Background
The City of Houston adopted its first comprehensive bike plan in 1993. In 2015, the City of Houston Planning & Development Department, the Public Works Department, and the Parks and Recreation departments led a 12-month planning initiative to update the plan for the first time since 1993.

Although the bike plan had not been updated for over 20 years, management districts across Houston, like the Greater East End Management District, lead the charge in expanding the city’s bike infrastructure. Additionally, TxDOT, with the financial and policy support from the Energy Corridor, will be installing West Houston’s first protected intersections along the Katy Freeway, improving safety for both cyclists and drivers.

The updated Bicycle Master Plan helps bring uniformity to the city’s bicycle infrastructure planning by compiling over 23 existing development plans from management districts and neighborhood organizations.

What’s happening now
The final bike plan was released in June. The plan presents nearly 1,800 miles of dedicated bike lanes, trails, and shared use paths. The plan calls for a host of short-term improvements as well as long-term infrastructure expansion.

While the plan is complete, the City Council must approve the updated plan. However, if City Council approves the plan, it does not ensure the implementation of the plan. The City Council’s adoption of the updated plan will serve as the guiding document for the city’s future bike infrastructure development. The implementation of the plan will require additional funding.

Bikesharing is also a growing service in Houston. The Federal Highway Administration recently awarded a $3.5 million grant to expand Houston’s B-Cycle network. The grant will nearly triple the number of B-Cycle stations and bicycles within the next two years.

What you can do
While the public feedback phase of the Draft Plan ended in April 2016, the plan needs support to be approved by City Council.

You can download letters of support to send to your Council Member. BikeHouston provides template emails to send to your council member. You can find your City Council Member here.

The bicycle advisory committee encourages individuals to email them with comments or questions about the Bike Plan.
The Westpark Tollway should have dynamic toll rates to better allocate capacity, so people don't sit in traffic. During rush hour maybe it should be $5 or even $10, while at 2am it should cost a nickel.

**IMPLEMENT DYNAMIC TOLL PRICING**

**Background**
Variable pricing shifts toll costs based on time of day or congestion levels. Variable pricing has proven effective in shifting travel patterns to accommodate for the changes in price.

Dynamic toll structures can be implemented in a variety of ways. The two most common practices are variable lane pricing and variable roadway pricing. Variable lane pricing allows travelers to pay a variable fee to use toll lanes. Roadway pricing refers to dynamic pricing on entire toll roads.

A common obstacle to implementing dynamic pricing is the public's aversion to increasing toll prices. However, research indicates education about the benefits of dynamic tolls and post-implementation satisfaction demonstrate individuals see improvement from the implementation of dynamic tolls.

**What's happening now**
Harris County Toll Road Authority implemented a dynamic tolls structure through the managed lanes on the Katy Freeway. The Katy Freeway allows single occupancy vehicles (SOV) to pay a toll and use the HOV lanes.

**What you can do**
A primary benefit of implementing dynamic toll pricing is the relatively low cost of implementation as compared to the overall positive impact on traffic. A dynamic price structure could be enacted using Houston's existing roadways or toll infrastructure.

Currently, there are no advocacy groups devoted to dynamic toll rates. Individuals could direct grassroots operations towards pressuring TXDOT and H-GAC to include dynamic tolls in their long range plans.
Multimodality Within Reach

To supplement the online discussion, MobilityHouston hosted several in-person discussions. Through programming and guided by the public's ideas for Houston's future, the conversations largely centered around how Houston can facilitate multimodal development.
MobilityHouston at Rice Policy Competition

In March, MobilityHouston partnered with the Center for Civic Leadership to host a pitch competition at Rice University. The event gave Rice students the opportunity to generate and pitch their policy proposals for new, innovative ways to address the mobility issues facing the Houston community. A total of five teams and approximately 40 students participated in the competition.

The winning team’s pitch envisions expanding opportunities for multimodal transit in Houston by streamlining the bike sharing and METRO ridership. Among their recommendations was the development of a single card that could be used to pay for both bike sharing and METRO services. This “C” or “Connect” card would combine the current payment abilities of METRO’s Q-Card and B-Cycle’s B-Card. The team’s pitch suggested planning future B-Cycle expansion stations around existing METRO stations as well as rebranding those stations as multimodal transportation centers.

The MobilityHouston event at Rice facilitated discussions around policy-focus, student-sourced solutions to Houston’s most pressing challenges. The winning pitch exemplifies Houston’s changing mentality about mobility and how to address the transportation challenges the community faces.
In June, MobilityHouston partnered with the Energy Corridor Management District to host a Conversation about Multimodality in West Houston.

The event brought together transportation experts, advocates, and planners together with community members to discuss the future of mobility in West Houston. The discussion highlighted the value and necessity of a more multi-modal mindset going into the future.

“It should not be a conversation of transit or highways or rail. We need all the tools in the toolbox to maximize mobility around Houston.” - Andrea French, TAG Houston

What's happening now?

Several organizations around Houston have made progress in making multimodality a reality. For example, BikeHouston includes METRO routes in their bike maps.

The efforts to foster multimodality in Houston have largely fallen to advocacy organizations. The Federal Highway Administration recently awarded B-Cycle $3.5 million to expand their service network. The expansion plans to focus on high-density areas and will nearly triple the size of the existing B-Cycle network.

Additionally, the management districts have taken the lead in creating mobility plans focusing on creating more walkable, multimodal communities.
Broad Engagement In Houston

As mentioned, MobilityHouston is one piece in a much larger mobility discussion taking play in Houston. Here are just a few examples of other initiatives that have undertaken public engagement efforts to create mobility solutions for the people of Houston.

**Bike Plan**
The Houston Bike Plan update included two phases of public engagement. The first phase took place before the planning process began in order to assess what the community priorities for updating the plan. The first round of engagement used public meeting and online surveys and discussion forums to establish shared vision and goals for the plan update.

The second initiative aimed to obtain feedback on the proposed updates to the bike plan. The engagement efforts included both in-person and online programs.

Throughout the engagement process BikeHouston provided ambassador training programs to give citizens the resources and education to discuss the plan with their communities.

**Bus Reimagining**
Public engagement around the METRO Bus Reimagining strove to bring both current METRO riders and potential or future riders into the conversation.

In addition hosting public meetings, METRO provided extensive educational material to the community throughout the reimagining process. Individuals have credited the success of the bus reimagining for community input and communication on all levels including extensive education efforts, staff training, and rider engagement. Not only did the initiative provide materials in four languages, but it engaged nearly 150 community stakeholders. Additionally, METRO provided multiple avenues to provide feedback including mobile or neighborhood meetings and online feedback.

The bus reimagining is a testament to an outreach initiative that strove to include a large swatch of the community of Houston as possible. Not only did METRO seek broad public engagement during the development of the plan, METRO continued outreach after the implementation of the plan.

August 2016 marks the one year anniversary of the implementation of the reimagined system. The success of the reimagining demonstrates the value of community input in transit planning and implementation process. Since the reimagining, METRO reports a 3% increase in total ridership, but breaking down the increase provides even more impressive ridership improvements. Weekend ridership increased dramatically with Saturday ridership improving 13% and Sunday ridership jumping almost 35%. Additionally, light rail usage increased 15%.