

This report is presented as a resource document for the ***Imagine Houston*** process. Its contents are the result of almost a year of public discussion and represent the consensus of the focus group volunteers. While the Planning & Development Department provided support to the process, it did not screen, edit or modify anything contained herein.

**Where We  
Meet**



March, 1995

Dear Fellow Houstonian:

Meeting places are the soul of a city. Meeting places create linkages between individuals and their neighbors, between neighbors and the greater community. This guiding principle led the members of the *Where We Meet* Focus Group through the long, arduous, sometimes contentious, but ultimately rewarding deliberations summarized in this report. In a sense, our focus group was a microcosm of the community dynamics that define a city. A broad range of personalities and opinions worked together to achieve a common goal. The sense of accomplishments we felt upon completing our task is analogous to the sense of community pride felt by citizens who know that they are an integral part of their community.

This report explores the concept of meeting places - where and what they are, what they can and should be, and how they can contribute to the civic pride, pleasure, and quality of life of the citizens. As you read this report, keep in mind that the primary goal is to develop policies and initiatives which encourage the citizens of Houston to foster the growth and maintenance of our meeting places. Policy alone cannot create a successful city; the involvement of the citizens at all levels of the social structure is the essential ingredient. To that end, the goals and strategies enumerated by our group are intended to be suggestive and inclusive rather than coercive. The City of Houston must provide incentives, but people must provide the impetus.

We wish to commend the Mayor for initiating this visioning process for Houston. We are grateful for the hard work of our facilitator and the support of our staff from the Planning and Development Department. We pledge our continuing efforts to you and the citizens of Houston as we move forward to realize our vision for a better city. Thank you for this opportunity to help shape the future of Houston.

Respectfully submitted,

*The Where We Meet Focus Group*

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# Preface

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In March of 1994, Houstonians seized an opportunity created by Mayor Bob Lanier to help determine the future of our community. Over one thousand people participated in a three-day **Imagine Houston** forum, during which they identified the issues facing Houston and set the agenda for future discussions.

**Imagine Houston** is a community-wide visioning process designed to bring people together to share information, learn about each other's viewpoints and to develop a consensus on the issues, goals and opportunities that will shape Houston's future. It will result in a plan that public, private and not-for-profit organizations can use as guidance on how to structure programs, services and financing to the betterment of our community.

After the March forum, working groups called focus groups, were formed to deal with specific topics:

*Community Safety*  
*Fostering Our Cultural Resources*  
*In Service to the Public*  
*Learning For Life*  
*Minding Our Natural Resources*  
*Taking Care of Ourselves*  
*Where We Live*  
*Where We Meet*  
*Where We Work*

An additional group, the *Youth Focus Group*, was subsequently created to obtain ideas from Houston's young people on the issues facing them.

Membership in the focus groups was open at all times to anyone; nearly one

thousand Houstonians participated in discussions from March to December. The work completed by the focus groups is the result of those public discussions. Each group developed a vision statement and a list of goals and actions that can be taken to achieve the goals.

While each focus group concentrated on its respective topic, certain themes emerged as constants throughout the reports. They include:

*economic competitiveness...* with other cities throughout the world, internationalism, job growth and training, economic opportunity for all residents;  
*education...* youth, education, preparing the leaders to lead, ensuring our future by ensuring theirs;  
*community building...* self-defined "urban villages", the idea of belonging to a community, personal responsibility;  
*urban and natural resources...* space and place, physical elements blending with the natural environment, a livable community;  
*celebrating diversity...* through public art, cultural and educational training, and through equal access for all.

**Imagine Houston** does not stop here. These ten reports form the foundation for the work of the **Imagine Houston** Steering Committee in creating a vision plan for Houston. The Steering Committee consists of members appointed by Mayor Lanier, a

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representative of each Council Member and a representative from each focus group. The Committee recognizes the importance of continued public dialogue. When complete in Spring 1995, this Plan should serve for the next 20 to 30 years as the basis for actions by every segment of our community including individuals and public and private-sector organizations.

***Imagine Houston*** is an extraordinary exercise in grass roots democracy. The committed citizens who participated have given our community insightful ideas to lead Houston into the next century. We are grateful for their efforts. We are hopeful about our future.

# Section 1: Introduction

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## ***Vision***

*To create a strategic plan to encourage publicly accessible environments emphasizing Houston's diversity - where people want to be with others*

## **Executive Summary**

### **The City and its meeting places**

A city must be understood as an organic whole. It is more than simply a group of people living in the same general area. A city offers opportunities and a sense of human vitality not available elsewhere; this is why civilizations have centered on cities. If one looks at the great cities of the world - Paris, London, Tokyo, Barcelona, Istanbul - one notices a defining characteristic in the abundance of extraordinary meeting places, places where citizens gather to celebrate their participation in the life of their city. Whatever their size or form, meeting places are the essential “glue” that unites diverse individuals into a community. They are where we join and interact with others; they allow us to fully experience the vibrancy of a great city. Meeting places are the essence of the city.

### **Characteristics of successful meeting places**

Houston's meeting places are our communal living room where our civic ceremonies and activities, both great and common, take place. Meeting places must be inseparable from the urban fabric of the city. They may be as humble and unassuming as one's doorstep, or as large and formalized as the Astrodome. *Where We Meet* chose

to address those spaces in between the porches and the Astrodome, those that can and do exist within our own neighborhoods, and those that join our neighborhoods. They are large and small, formal and informal, civic and commercial, green and urban, planned and spontaneous. Successful meeting places share certain fundamental characteristics: they should be readily accessible, comfortable, inviting and safe. They should be visually, physically, or intellectually stimulating, they should inspire, touch our emotions. Additionally, they might offer structured recreational activities, showcase local talent, serve as commercial centers, and provide space for quiet reflection. In all cases, they serve as common ground where there is no admission fee, no exclusive rules nor membership required, where citizens congregate and interact. They are where we assimilate the various cultures and diversity of the city and become a community.

### **Challenges posed by Houston**

Houston poses unique challenges to the development of meeting spaces. Growing six-fold in population since 1930, the city is a creature of the automobile age. The population is sparsely dispersed over a large area, and has, over time, settled around a series of regional commercial centers away from the downtown area. Although ethnically and culturally diverse, the population tends to be both geographically and economically segregated. Many of the residents are not native to the city. These factors tend to inhibit a strong sense of community for the city as a whole, and

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must be addressed in any proposed plan for urban meeting places.

**The Action Plan**

Participants of the *Where We Meet* Focus Group recognized that people meet in many ways - from the Galleria, to the office coffee room, to the neighborhood supermarket, to the country club. While all of these opportunities to meet remain important, this group focused its efforts on those meeting places for which public policy plays an influential role. It is essential that we establish policy that looks comprehensively at the city and allows us to plan comprehensively for the city and its residents. This is appropriate since a city must serve the needs of its citizens. The goals and actions identified by this group stress the need to inventory and understand existing meeting places, commit to develop more of them, define guidelines for their design and construction, establish programs to fund them, and offer suggestions to animate them.

To truly be a great city, to seize the spirit of Houston, to make strides in solving the problems of our city, we must step back from our narrowly focused agendas and understand that *Where We Meet* - that “common ground” - is where we transcend those barriers that hold us apart. After all, people, not walls, make a city.

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## **Background**

During the ten month period, we completed the task of creating Goals, Actions and Strategies that would foster the vision statement and create viable “meeting places” in Houston. The group began work by identifying places or activities which currently create successful meeting places in Houston, places where diverse individuals come together to be with others. Places cited included the International Festivals, the Rice Village, cafes, theaters and museums. The group also identified places that do not work in Houston or factors that prevent successful meeting places from occurring. This included things such as strip centers, Galleria entrance, a lack of public transportation connecting meeting places and dependence upon automobiles. We were conscious of identifying the specifics behind successful meeting places in other cities. Our study involved examining successful meeting places developed by other cities such as Ross’s Landing in Chattanooga, the Strand in Galveston, Lower Downtown Denver and Faneull Hall in Boston.

Our findings were communicated at a joint meeting of Steering Committee and focus groups during a mid-term report issued in August. While it was important to look at other places, suggestions were raised to evaluate the pool of untapped resources here in Houston which could be developed into good meeting places. The possibility of establishing meeting places similar to Transco Waterfall, Allen’s Landing, and Hermann Park were also examined. From August through November, the group worked

on developing a set of seven goals and corresponding actions which would be required to attain those goals. We also identified funding sources and key players (both institutional, governmental, individuals and private/public partnerships) which would assist in making those actions happen. The month of November and December was very demanding for the group. Several interim meetings were held in an effort to finalize the work and prepare a presentation summarizing our action plan. The following section is the action plan of the *Where We Meet* Focus Group.

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## Section 2: Goals and Actions

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### **Goal 1:**

*Identify and analyze existing and needed meeting spaces, places where people can, could or do congregate and interact.*

#### **Action 1.1: Inventory land and develop a master plan for meeting places**

Inventory publicly owned land and other real estate, make information public and on maps. Analyze its future potential and select properties suitable for meeting places. Develop and implement a master plan to group such places where beneficial, and interconnect them where it improves mobility between meeting places.

**Who:** City of Houston Planning and Development (lead), American Institute of Architects (AIA), American Planning Association (APA), American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), Public Improvement Districts/Municipal Utility Districts (MUDs), area associations

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, pro bono professional work, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, area associations

#### **Action 1.2: Develop urban neighborhood planning framework**

Create a framework for urban neighborhood planning that encourages and promotes human interaction, and incorporates public

spaces or establishments that function as meeting places such as recreation centers, libraries and schools. Framework to operate and to integrate with the City of Houston comprehensive plan.

**Who:** City of Houston Planning and Development (lead), Livable City Coalition

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO), pro bono professional work, corporate philanthropy

#### **Action 1.3:**

##### **A. Conduct a broad public survey to determine where people meet and what attracts them**

Conduct a broad-based survey of Houstonians through a "write / fax / phone-in" campaign publicized through the print and radio media, to get individual suggestions for favorite or desired meeting places, and to determine where they go to be with others, and what attracts them to those places.

##### **B. Inventory meeting places in region**

Inventory existing meaningful meeting places in the city on a regional scale, and on a neighborhood and local basis, and identify areas lacking such places. Identify related public spaces that already act as meeting places or that have the existing density of regular users which is needed to create meeting places. Start the process by locating existing or proposed spaces within the areas designated as Major Activity Centers during the Zoning research process.

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**Who:** Where We Meet Focus Group (co-lead), City of Houston Planning and Development (co-lead), Livable City Coalition

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, pro bono professional work, corporate philanthropy, METRO

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## **Goal 2:**

*Develop and implement a plan to create new and enhance existing environments which are open to the general public and free of charge.*

Owners and Managers Association (BOMA)

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** Pro bono professional work, City of Houston General Fund budget, property owners, property management, civic commissions (e.g. Parks People Board)

### **Action 2.1: Define and categorize preferred meeting places**

Define and categorize types of existing meeting places and locations where Houstonians come together for social interaction.

**Who:** Where We Meet Focus Group (lead), AIA, APA, ASLA, City of Houston Planning and Development, Cultural Arts Council of Houston (CACH)

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** Pro bono professional work, City of Houston General Fund budget, Houston Galveston Council of Government (H-GAC), Greater Houston Partnership (GHP)

### **Action 2.2: Develop criteria for planning and design of open spaces**

Develop a set of criteria for planning and design of existing open spaces to be converted to meeting places.

**Who:** *Where We Meet* Focus Group (lead), AIA, APA, ASLA, City of Houston Planning and Development & Parks and Recreation, CACH, Urban Land Institute (ULI), Building

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### **Action 2.3: Invest in important public projects**

Invest public funds in projects and in infrastructure where public meeting places are deemed important in order to stimulate and attract private investment and projects.

**Who:** City of Houston, Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), METRO, H-GAC

**When:** Medium and long term

**Funding:** Bond issues, City of Houston General Fund budget, County, State, Federal, METRO, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, new property tax, Tax Increment Finance Districts, H-GAC, special tax, independent school districts, foundations

### **Action 2.4: Create a pedestrian plan**

Create a pedestrian plan (similar to Major Thoroughfare and Freeway plan), that includes an inventory of existing sidewalks and where sidewalks are missing, and establishes future priority based on need.

**Who:** City of Houston Planning and Development, METRO, TxDOT, private developers, urban designers, professional associations, Where We Meet Focus Group, area associations (business & homeowners), Council on Aging, Urban Land Institute (ULI)

**When:** High priority - short-term project

**Funding:** METRO, City of Houston General Fund budget, Federal Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality (CMAQ)

**Remarks:** You can't have a meeting place if people can't walk.

### **Action 2.5: Revise city code to provide design guidelines for pedestrian walks**

Revise City code to provide design guidelines for pedestrian sidewalks, including: width, lighting, street trees, street furniture, utility coordination, materials, safety, and relationship to traffic.

**Who:** City of Houston Public Works and Engineering & Planning and Development, METRO, area associations, Construction Industry Council (CIC), Utility Coordination Committee, Urban Land Institute (ULI)

**When:** Short-term project, part of Pedestrian Plan

**Funding:** Federal, City of Houston General Fund budget, METRO, volunteer, TxDOT

**Remarks:** Need input from a wide range of disciplines

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## **Goal 3:**

*Identify and encourage advantageous land use relationships through regulations and inducements related to private development that encourage uses such as retail, restaurants theaters, museums, etc.*

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**Action 3.1: Establish inducement program to create more meeting places**

Establish inducements, such as tax rebates, to nourish and start private sector uses adjacent to meeting places. Plan that will phase out as uses and places become established.

**Who:** City of Houston (lead), Public Improvement Districts/Management Districts, area business associations

**When:** Medium term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, County, State, METRO, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs

**Action 3.2: Create a “mini park” plan oriented to the private sector**

Create a "mini" park plan e.g., small areas from 1/4 acre to 5 acres within and /or adjacent to selected meeting places with open green space suitable for various uses such as play, picnics, relaxation, etc., with tax abatement inducements to private sector owners.

**Who:** Professional organizations (lead), City of Houston Parks and Recreation

**When:** Short and medium term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, County, State, METRO, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, civic commissions

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**Goal 4:**

*Provide services and safety at meeting places, including public access, transportation, sanitation, and security.*

**Action 4.1: Create low cost, artistically designed shuttle**

Create a series of low cost shuttle routes within specific districts or areas, including Downtown, the Medical Center and the Museum District, the Galleria, and other major activity centers. Buses should be small, with distinctive design possibly by local artists, or possibly “shrink-wrapped” with creative advertising. They should come frequently and be inexpensive.

**Who:** Public Improvement Districts or Management Districts (lead), Harris County, METRO, area business associations, H-GAC, CACH

**When:** Medium term

**Funding:** METRO, H-GAC, Federal, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs

**Action 4.2: Create requirements for rest room facilities, drinking fountains at meeting places**

Create a set of requirements and standards, depending on size restraints, for rest room facilities, drinking fountains, lights, etc., for selected meeting places, new and existing.

**Who:** AIA (lead), City of Houston Planning and Development (lead), BOMA, CIC, ASLA

**When:** Short to medium term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, Federal, pro bono professional work

**Action 4.3: Establish adequate security policies**

For security purposes, establish special bike and horse patrol units which would be assigned to public spaces, acting in the dual role of law enforcement officials and community ambassadors.

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**Who:** City of Houston Police (lead), Public Improvement Districts/Management Districts, area business associations, neighborhood/civic groups

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, H-GAC, METRO, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, property management

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## ***Goal 5:***

*Provide special physical amenities at meeting places like landscaping, water features, art, etc.*

### **Action 5.1: Establish incentives for public areas in private development**

Establish incentives for private development to provide amenities in their public areas. This can be in the form of a "public amenity bonus" like a property tax reduction to private developers in proportion to the area dedicated for transit stops, pocket parks, bike paths and the like, or a tax break to commercial business establishments when they provide on-site outdoor public environments.

**Who:** City of Houston (lead), Harris County, area business associations, neighborhood/civic groups

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, pro bono professional work, County, Developers

### **Action 5.2: Create a task force to develop a master policy for amenities**

Create a special task force to develop a master policy for amenities to be placed in meeting places, and to seek out private donations for art and contributions by artists.

**Who:** *Where We Work* Focus Group (lead), Professional Organizations, City of Houston Planning and Development, CACH, Public Improvement Districts, area associations

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, pro bono professional work, County, developers, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, area associations, chambers of commerce

### **Action 5.3: Enact comprehensive public art ordinance**

Enact comprehensive public art ordinance that require funding for public non-residential projects and inducements for private non-residential projects. Ordinance needs to be inclusive enough to provide for cultural programming and facilities as well as works of art.

**Who:** CACH (lead), City of Houston, Harris County

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, property owners

**Remarks:** This legislation exists in Los Angeles which allows the percentage for requirement to be satisfied by providing an outdoor stage and a series of concerts, or a

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museum facility, as well as by providing more traditional works of public art.

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## **Goal 6:**

*Provide animation within meeting places and sponsor programming to generate spontaneous and planned human activities, to include vendors, musicians, artists, parades, festivals, events, etc.*

### **Action 6.1: Streamline code to encourage animation**

Streamline City code and implement low cost access requirements to selected types of vendors as part of the City's regulations in relation to meeting places, to include food and drink, necessity items, umbrellas on carts, hours of operation, number of vendors per acre, security, cleaning, maintenance, etc.

**Who:** City of Houston Planning and Development (lead), Police, Health and Human Services, Public Works and Engineering, Public Improvement Districts/Management Districts, area business associations, neighborhood/civic groups, CACH

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, volunteers

### **Action 6.2: Create a provider referral/registration data bank**

Create a data bank where individuals and groups could "register" their types of services, and be "pre-qualified" or "licensed" to

participate in public events or perform/sell in public spaces. Event organizers could also contact the data bank to get one-stop referrals.

**Who:** CACH (lead), City of Houston Civic Center, Health and Human Services, and Parks and Recreation, Universities

**When:** Short term

**Funding:** Visitors and Convention/Tourism, CACH, Foundations

**Remarks:** Access fees in the future

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## **Goal 7:**

*Incorporate successful urban design principles into meeting places, creating friendly and inviting structures, spaces and environments.*

### **Action 7.1: Develop performance design criteria for spatial relationships**

Develop performance design criteria for spatial relationships both within meeting places and between adjacent public and private developments. Develop design guideline to encourage street level activity. Create a resource manual or guide to give examples of appropriate design and highlight the benefits gained.

**Who:** Professional Organizations (lead), City of Houston Planning and Development & other departments, pro bono professional work, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, area associations, developers

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**When:** Short to medium term

**Funding:** Pro bono professional work, City of Houston General Fund budgets, Public Improvement Districts/MUDs, area associations

**Action 7.2: Review current street grid pattern and impact of one way streets**

Review the current street grid pattern and its potential negative impact on the development of successful large and contiguous meeting places. Close some streets where intelligent trade-offs make it feasible, and consolidate grid blocks where possible to have larger tracts of public land without vehicular interruption, create destination meeting places that Houstonians identify with, support, and go there to celebrate life, and to be with others.

**Who:** Professional Organizations (lead), City of Houston Planning & Development, and Public Works and Engineering (lead), METRO, Public Improvement Districts/Management Districts

**When:** Medium term

**Funding:** City of Houston General Fund budget, pro bono professional work, METRO

## Section 3: Appendices

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