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What We Owe Our Children: Building a Healthier Houston Region

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This morning, an ultrasound revealed that my wife and I are expecting a baby boy next spring, a baby boy who will be my age—36—in 2049. Assuming humans survive on the planet and continue to inhabit the Houston region as expected, my son will be one of at least 10 million Houstonians.¹ The Astrodome, if it stands, will be a silly old man at almost 85 years old. NASA will be 91. The light rail system will be 45.

I want my son to grow up in a city where he can ride his skateboard around his neighborhood with his friends and experience a diversity of stores, art, people, and architecture. He should have access to clean air; live music; a thriving, diverse marketplace; good museums and parks; healthy, delicious food; and a stimulating, meaningful education.

I want the world that my son inherits, should he become a father in 2049, to have a reasonable chance of supporting my grandchildren to live their own full, human lives. My son should have equitable access to transportation, job, location, and lifestyle options, and to be able fully live the rich life that is only possible when all of Houston's diverse population enjoys ready access to the same.

The people of the Houston region need to do our share to preserve our planet for our grandchildren

Houston Tomorrow was born of a similar story of a father looking out for his sons. When I was a sophomore at Lamar High School in 1992, my dad took my friends and me to Mustang Island, where we all stayed in a condo on the beach for a week.

While we were running around on the dunes, my dad saw cable television for the first time in his life and was glued to CSPAN BookTV. The entire broadcast day was dedicated to Beyond the Limits, the follow-up to the seminal environmental study The Limits to Growth. My father couldn't stomach the idea that humankind is at risk of exceeding the holding capacity of the planet, considering what that would mean for his sons.

The result was that my father changed his career to dedicate himself to fighting climate change. This urge to help save the planet so that humans may continue became Houston Tomorrow. We work every day to improve the quality of life for all the people of the Houston region. Our vision is that, in 2036, on Houston's 200th birthday, the region will be home to the happiest, healthiest, most prosperous people in the nation.

Every neighborhood across the region should provide families with healthy food options

The seal of the City of Houston shows a plow and a train. Millions of years of erosion of the Rocky Mountains has blessed our region with the rich top soil that allowed our region's diverse agricultural history. We're also blessed with a living, productive bay estuary system still harvested for shrimp, oysters, crabs, and fish, and more restaurants per capita than any other city in the world.²

I want my son's generation to have access to a healthy, plentiful diet enjoying the rich, diverse food traditions of the Houston region. I hope barbecue is still good in 2049. I hope Galveston Bay continues to recover, and we develop distinct appellations of oysters, recognizing the quality from individual reefs such as Smith Point.

Houston Tomorrow hosts the Houston Food Policy Workgroup, dedicated to nurturing the growth of a sustainable local food system, accessible to all, through education, collaboration, communication, and creation of a food policy council for the Houston region. If our local governments take regional food policy seriously, we'll have better policies on the ground, preservation of our agricultural tradition, healthier people, and better meals on tables across the region.

Children should be able to walk or skate or bike where they please on their own in every neighborhood

I grew up in Montrose on my bike, and my skateboard, and walking around with my friends. We beat every video game at the convenience store at Alabama and Waugh. We earned all the pizza and soda we wanted at Chicago Pizza by walking around putting coupons on windshields around the neighborhood. Everyone first kissed in the climbing tree in Menil Park, and we watched the museum being built while hunting toads in the storm drains on Branard.

I want my son to feel safe to explore his city.

That is why we helped form the Houston Coalition for Complete Streets—now thirty-three organizations strong—to push for regional and local policies that will make all streets safe for all users, regardless of whether they are riding in a car or bus, walking or skateboarding, or simply hanging out in a public space.

Mayor Annise Parker has now signed an executive order instructing all employees of the City of Houston to build safer streets appropriate to Houston's diversity of neighborhoods and uses. We are now seeking a

regional Complete Streets policy, and funding for the Neighborhood Greenways Initiative, and working with the city to most efficiently begin making all our neighborhoods safer.

In fifteen years, I expect my son to be able to ride his bike from the Energy Corridor to the Astrodome on a continuous network of safe streets, after which I hope he can catch the Bayou and Utility Greenways System to NASA. Our children should enjoy the freedom of a safe street network.

Each neighborhood should have easy access to a major center connected to the rest of the region

The Houston region enjoys the benefits of seven major job centers: Downtown, the Medical Center, Greenway, Uptown, Westchase, Greenspoint, and the Energy Corridor. Our historic core stretching from the East End to Westchase and north to Greenspoint contains many mixed-use urban districts and dense neighborhoods home to millions of people.

Our effective HOV Bus Rapid Transit system has been developed in a manner similar to those of many other US cities. All routes originate on freeway locations in low-density residential areas and take you downtown. This needs to be tweaked.

We should use our existing freeway infrastructure to connect all of our job centers and high-density residential areas in the style of our existing HOV bus system. This will complement our high capacity light rail system that currently carries more passengers per mile of public investment than any other modern light rail line.³

Connecting our centers—by transit, walking, biking, and car—will allow our children to freely travel the Houston region, encouraging multiculturalism, strengthening our job-creating centers, and providing better access to the many assets of the Houston region to more people.

We should make it easy also to access a diversity of natural areas from any center. For the wildlife to survive we need to connect the remaining wilderness areas of the Houston region with wildlife passageways. These should include a diversity of niches, interfaces, geology, and topography, with little fingers of nature reaching into every neighborhood.

Houston's high quality rapid transit zone should develop equitably and optimally by allowing a large number of people to live, work, and play together

Should Houston complete the first major phase of high quality transit deployment, we'll have 31 square miles of urban land within a half-mile

walk of a station. We need strategies for public investment, design guidelines, and planning to build Houston's next story—equitable transit-oriented growth.

All of us may dream of spending part of our lives walking, working, and living in a thriving urban core with vast opportunities for jobs, education, investment, support, contacts, friends, lovers, and good times.

Houston Tomorrow seeks to establish a fund restricted to those 31 square miles to facilitate sustainable, equitable, transit-oriented development through deed restrictions, land banking, design guidelines, easements, access to restricted capital, and shared resources such as parking facilities, public spaces, and infrastructure.

Should this fund succeed, my son and 10 million Houstonians will be able to make major decisions such as choosing housing and office location, buying a car, or voting, knowing that an option for every Houstonian is to live a car-free, walkable urban life with healthy access to everything a modern human city has to offer.

We need to work together at the regional level to make more equitable and efficient major public decisions

To seize our opportunities, we need a shared vision of prosperity, equity, and sustainability. Houston Tomorrow has long worked to help the public better understand and be more involved in regional planning and funding allocation decisions. Every major Houston Tomorrow program is conceived and designed to scale up to benefit all the people of the region.

We align our work to the expressed wishes, dreams, desires, and concerns of the people of the region by attempting to follow the direction of the Citizens' Vision for Houston's Future published by Blueprint Houston, the Houston Area Survey, and the Our Great Region 2040 process. We believe that nonprofits and civic leaders should align their strategy and programming with the express wishes of the people of the Houston region.

In 2049, I want all of our children to have fair access to a productive, supportive, and meaningful regional conversation that guides major public investments and policies.

Our Great Region 2040 pulls ideas from the collective wisdom of the people of Houston to find ways we can all contribute to a greater future for our children. The largest, most representative survey ever of the policy priorities of our people reveals that Houstonians predominantly support preserving our existing ecological resources; balancing our regional transportation spending among modes; securing, cleaning, and conserving our water; and providing more affordable housing options.

Houston will always rely upon silly, crazy, nerdy, and inspiring ideas

Working at Houston Tomorrow means you thrive on throwing ideas out there and seeing if they stick. We seek to continuously improve an infrastructure to catch and foster good ideas and allow complex regionally significant programs to come to fruition.

For example, we have on the table at this time the following proposals: City of Houston Neighborhood Greenways; the Houston Regional Food Policy Council; McGowen Green - a great urban park for Midtown; forming a local vegetable farmers' cooperative; a neighborhood, healthy-consumer cooperative bodega; HoustonNeighborhoods.org; and a General Plan for Houston's Future based on the vision, values, and goals of the city's citizens.

We aspire to serve as an incubator of good ideas for the Houston region and to nourish meaningful transformative solutions. I hope that my son finds a Houston in 2049 that continues to thrive on new ideas, supports wildcatters, and recognizes innovation.

We can raise the children of the Houston region well

Within our reach is the greatest combination of thinkers, doers, and creators in the energy field anywhere in the world; the largest medical facility in the world,⁴ and the moon and ample water, land, and fertility to feed our growing population if we fully farmed our land.

We are the most diverse city in the nation,⁵ have the best art collection in a thousand miles—save Mexico City, are the builders of the largest off-road hike and bike network in the nation, and have added almost one hundred thousand jobs between July 2012 and July 2013.⁶

Our region will grow by at least 3.5 million people by 2040. Each neighborhood, ecosystem, economy, and culture will feel the effects of this growth. These two things are not optional, but our options are endless about what we, as a region, will do with our public funding, our support and patronage, our hard work, and the investment of raising children here in Houston and hoping that they will stay near us.

Houston Tomorrow works for all of our children so that they, not we, may be the determinants of their own lives. Let us not make mistakes that our children cannot undo. Let us leave a Houston region in which they can thrive and meet the challenges of their own day. We owe it to our great, great, great, great grandchildren to try.

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