

1. Report No. SWUTC/04/473700-00047-1		2. Government Accession No.		3. Recipient's Catalog No.	
4. Title and Subtitle A Symposium Assessing the Concept of Regional Transportation Authorities: Application to Houston, Texas				5. Report Date January 2004	
				6. Performing Organization Code	
7. Author(s) Robert Hill and Carol A. Lewis, Ph.D.				8. Performing Organization Report No. Report 473700-00047-1	
9. Performing Organization Name and Address Center for Transportation Training and Research Texas Southern University 3100 Cleburne Avenue Houston, Texas 77004				10. Work Unit No. (TRAIS)	
				11. Contract or Grant No. DTRS99-G-0006	
12. Sponsoring Agency Name and Address Southwest Region University Transportation Center Texas Transportation Institute Texas A&M University System College Station, Texas 77843-3135				13. Type of Report and Period Covered	
				14. Sponsoring Agency Code	
15. Supplementary Notes Supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation, University Transportation Centers Program					
16. Abstract  <p>The Houston metropolitan area is in the planning phases of determining if a multi-modal regional transportation authority is required to address the region's mobility challenge. Various regions of the country are developing innovative ways to address their multi-modal transportation challenges. In the greater Houston area, there is a tremendous need for agencies, jurisdictions and all modes of transportation to collaborate on future projects in the region, known as "Regionalism". The purpose of "Regionalism" is to facilitate liaisons between the region's leadership, resources and citizens around a shared agenda for improving the economic vitality, the standard of living and quality of life in the region.</p> <p>The purpose of this study is to assemble transportation professionals to address current transportation needs in light of new national transportation initiatives in the region. The establishment of collaboration between public agencies and private entities that are stakeholders in the Houston region's transportation infrastructure and the creation of awareness of current and future transportation needs in the region will be discussed. The outlined objective was achieved by conducting: 1) a literature review to assess national initiatives on regionalism or regional cooperation and 2) a symposium, which attracted the area's transportation professionals to discuss questions.</p>					
17. Key Words Regionalism, Multi-Modal, Regional Transportation Authorities			18. Distribution Statement No restrictions. This document is available to the public through NTIS: National Technical Information Service 5285 Port Royal Road Springfield, Virginia 22161		
19. Security Classif.(of this report) Unclassified		20. Security Classif.(of this page) Unclassified		21. No. of Pages 23	22. Price



**A Symposium Assessing the Concept of Regional Transportation Authorities:  
Applications to Houston, Texas**

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Research Report SWUTC/04/473700-00047-1

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January 2004



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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Support for this research was provided by a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation, University Transportation Centers Program to the Southwest Region University Transportation Center. The Center would like to acknowledge all individuals who were instrumental in the completion of this report.

## **ABSTRACT**

The Houston metropolitan area is in the planning phases of determining if a multi-modal regional transportation authority is required to address the region's mobility challenge. Various regions of the country are developing innovative ways to address their multi-modal transportation challenges. In the greater Houston area, there is a tremendous need for agencies, jurisdictions and all modes of transportation to collaborate on future projects in the region, known as "Regionalism". The purpose of "Regionalism" is to facilitate liaisons between the region's leadership, resources and citizens around a shared agenda for improving the economic vitality, the standard of living and quality of life in the region.

The purpose of this study is to assemble transportation professionals to address current transportation needs in light of new national transportation initiatives in the region. The establishment of collaboration between public agencies and private entities that are stakeholders in the Houston region's transportation infrastructure and the creation of awareness of current and future transportation needs in the region will be discussed. The outlined objective was achieved by conducting: 1) a literature review to assess national initiatives on regionalism or regional cooperation and 2) a symposium, which attracted the area's transportation professionals to discuss questions.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transportation is a key element in a region's economic development. In 2004, TEA-21 will be reauthorized determining the funding mechanism for financing the future of the country's transportation infrastructure for the next six years. It is also a fact that current funding levels do not match the nation's transportation needs and competition for federal and state funds is steep. As a result public agencies are looking at alternative funding strategies.

Various regions of the country are developing innovative ways to address their multi-modal transportation needs. Several communities established entities that cross jurisdictional, agency and modal boundaries. Much discussion occurred in the 2003 Texas legislative session relative to the issue of regionalism. In response, Texas Southern University's Barbara Jordan & Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs and the Center for Transportation, Training and Research sponsored a symposium to educate, as well as hear from transportation related officials to determine whether an authority charged with implementing a regional system, is needed in this region. This project assembled transportation professionals to address current transportation needs in light of new national transportation initiatives in regionalism, encourage further cooperation between public agencies and private entities who are stakeholders in the Houston region's transportation infrastructure and create awareness about current and future transportation needs in the region.

The recommendation from attendees was that the region's agencies, modes and jurisdictions must work cooperatively to address the transportation needs of the region, participants advocated utilizing the existing agency structures to perform that function. There seemed to be general consensus about the need for more transportation investment in the region and greater efforts at collaboration, but there was reluctance to welcoming another level of government to manage money and transportation projects being handled by the existing agencies. It was mentioned that regional cooperation already exists in Houston, but is not established on a single-agency basis.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the nation and is the core of a growing metropolitan area. It is important to address the transportation needs of the region as a whole. Models of

regionalism from around the country provide examples of agencies working across jurisdictional lines and across modes. Regional cooperation, at its best, is better than any one agency trying to accommodate all tasks or all modes at one time.

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## INTRODUCTION

Transportation is a key element in the region's economic development. Resembling many other regions in the country, the Houston metropolitan area depends on state and federal funds for implementing many of its transportation projects. Funding is limited and the local transit authority's (METRO) 2003 referendum and the reauthorization of TEA-21 are key elements in future funding of the region's transportation infrastructure. In 2003, METRO voters approved a referendum that will provide needed funding for transit improvements. In 2004, TEA-21 will be reauthorized determining the funding mechanism for financing the future of the country's transportation infrastructure for the next six years. It is also a fact that current funding levels do not match the nation's transportation needs and competition for federal and state funds is steep. As a result public agencies are looking at alternative funding strategies.

Various regions of the country are developing innovative ways to address their multi-modal transportation needs. California has a statewide freight and passenger rail plan, which is attracting a tremendous amount of federal funding to the state. States in the northeast are developing a high-speed passenger rail. Dallas/Fort Worth is implementing a multimillion-dollar regional transportation system. The Alameda Corridor in Los Angeles, a public/private enterprise, has addressed the congestion of 20 miles of local automobile and rail traffic by implementing a grade separated transportation corridor. Boston's Big Dig is an incredible engineering project, if not the most expensive at over \$14 billion.

The projects mentioned above all impact the region around them and are very important mobility elements in their communities. In the greater Houston area, there is a tremendous need for agencies, jurisdictions and all modes of transportation to collaborate on future projects in the region. In 2000, a transportation and infrastructure task force, sponsored by Congressman Nick Lampson and other elected officials, established that the most important transportation challenge facing the Gulf Coast area is to increase interagency, inter-jurisdictional and inter-governmental cooperation and coordination. Secondary goals were to increase efficiency in intermodal freight movement and improve the region's mass transportation within and beyond traditionally served areas to include intercity connectivity. Further, much discussion occurred in the 2003 state

legislative session relative to the issue of regionalism. In response, Texas Southern University's Barbara Jordan & Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs and the Center for Transportation, Training and Research sponsored a symposium to educate, as well as hear from transportation related officials to determine whether an authority charged with implementing a regional system, is needed in this region (Final Report, March 2001).

## **OBJECTIVE**

The Houston region is developing new transportation systems and expanding existing ones. However, transportation challenges remain since the Houston region accounts for one of the nation's largest cities, one of the fastest growing counties, one of the largest ports, two of the larger downtown areas (Houston downtown and the Galleria), two major airports and tremendous petroleum, chemical, high tech, and medical industries. The region will require a larger and more innovative transportation plan in order to address future population growth, economic development, and the increase of NAFTA traffic. The purpose of this project is to assemble transportation professionals to address current transportation needs in light of new national transportation initiatives in the region, encourage further cooperation between public agencies and private entities who are stakeholders in the Houston region's transportation infrastructure and create awareness about current and future transportation needs in the region.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The outlined objective was achieved by first conducting a literature review to assess national initiatives on regionalism or regional cooperation. An evaluation of regionalism examples and present success can establish a guide for implementation in a new region. The literature illustrates regional initiatives take several key forms at a minimum as follows: 1) across jurisdictions, 2) across agencies and 3) across modes. The next step was to establish a symposium, which brought public and private sector representatives to dialog about the potential for regionalism in the Houston area. The representatives' opinions about the need for regionalism in the area will be compiled for dissemination and public discussion.

## **BACKGROUND**

Around the country, urban areas are considering the implementation of Regional Transportation Authorities or RTA's, as a means of addressing inter-modal, cross-jurisdictional, interagency transportation needs. The purpose of "Regionalism" is to facilitate liaisons of the region's leadership, resources and citizens around a shared agenda for improving the economic vitality, the standard of living and quality of life in the region. The goal is to facilitate collaborative actions of regional benefit, which cannot be taken as effectively or efficiently within individual jurisdictions or individual agencies.

In order to properly address how regional cooperation or regionalism could benefit any area, existing RTA's around the United States were reviewed. Conducting this procedure provided an understanding of how to properly implement specific guidelines for the existence of new RTA's. Each individual RTA simply addresses the needs of its designated area. So far, the RTAs reviewed seem to share few characteristics in common. The RTA has to comply with the needs, as well as the desires of its area. A Texas RTA could encompass more than one agency, jurisdiction and/or mode of transportation according to Texas HB 3588 filed during the 2003 legislature (State of Texas, 2003).

The objective of gathering information on regional collaboration is to assess the collaborative efforts in a designated area. Evidence demonstrates effective partnerships enhance transportation systems and the decision making process. Partnership allows more than one agency to combine resources, instead of solely applying FHWA, DOT and local money independently for any transportation project. The decision process is broadened by having more than one Chief Executive Officer on the strategy and decision making sessions. Transportation systems have a better chance of effectiveness when considering the benefits and impacts across multiple jurisdictions. Partnerships not only facilitate leveraging of funds, but the coordination of services across jurisdictions in the designated region.

## **STATE-OF-THE-PRACTICE**

The initial research did not yield many examples of regional, multi-modal transportation organizations. A larger, better-funded study would allow a greater in-depth investigation of national regionalism initiatives. For the purposes of the analysis and to show diversity in regionalism options, information on three of the better-known RTAs' structures and operating parameters were compiled and documented into this study. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Georgia Regional Transportation Authority for the Greater Atlanta Area, and TranStar of Houston, Texas, give an idea about missions, as well as modal, and jurisdictional variations. All of the agencies address transportation-oriented problems to enhance the quality of life for their citizens.

### Port Authority of New York and New Jersey

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey is the most diverse authority studied. The Port Authority aims to identify and meet the critical transportation needs of the bistate region's businesses, residents, and visitors. Beginning in 1921, the port developed into one of the vast regional management agencies in the United States. The Port Authority is responsible for 17 jurisdictions with help from 18 agencies to manage bus, rail, airports, water ports, tunnels, bridges, terminals, and ferries in this defined area. All of these jurisdictions, agencies and modes work cooperatively to ensure that this region's transportation modes functions effectively and in an interrelated manner. (The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, 2003).

The Port Authority is financially self-supporting, receives no tax revenues from its represented states or local jurisdictions; the agency has no power to tax. It relies almost entirely on revenues generated by facilities' user tolls, fees, and rents. The governor of each state appoints six members to the Board of Commissioners, subject to state senate approval. Board members serve without pay for overlapping six-year terms. The governors retain the right to veto the actions of commissioners from his or her state. The Board of Commissioners appoints an Executive Director to carry out the agency's policies and manage the day-to-day operations.

### Georgia Regional Transportation Authority

The state of Georgia aims to improve air quality and coordinate land use to promote growth that can be sustained by future generations. Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) is responsible for transportation in 13 counties consisting of over 80 governments (Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, 2003). GRTA, a fairly new agency began in 1999 with Senate Bill 57 (SB 57). SB 57 insists the state of Georgia should implement an agency or authority to manage transportation issues in the state. (Senate Bill 57. Atlanta, Georgia: 1999.) Special provisions must be met in order to gain proper funding for the authority to supply the transportation requests of the counties or districts in the transportation authority. The special provisions could be the compliance with the governor, providing for ground transportation and air quality projects within special districts, as well as provide for the purposes, status, jurisdictions, powers, duties, rights, procedures, immunities, personnel, and resources of the authority. The governor is the director of this authority and is responsible for the appointment of his members and meetings of the Governor's Development Council. This authority is responsible for commuter rail, trains, buses, vanpool, HOV lanes, new roads, bicycle lanes and sidewalks.

### TranStar Multi- agency and Multi- modal traffic coordination for Houston/Harris County

TranStar provides transportation and emergency management service using collective resources of several agencies in the greater Houston area to maximize safety and mobility to the public. This particular organization is comprised of eight counties and the collaboration of four agencies in the greater Houston area. The City of Houston, Harris County, METRO, and Tx DOT collaboratively occupy the TranStar headquarters building that facilitates the coordination of transit, highways, and emergency management in the area. TranStar opened in April of 1996, and serves a central function in managing traffic in urban areas. Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) principles are key in facilitating 24-hour traffic flows and informing driver's of impedance's to normal operation. Advanced notice of accidents or congestion help alleviate further traffic congestion and different routes are pursued. With advanced technology offered by TranStar, traffic management is done in a faster, more efficient manner. (Houston TranStar, 2003).

## Regulatory Framework

From a national perspective, transportation initiatives are implemented to attract more regions to form partnerships. Bills such as ISTEA, TEA-21 and state bills encourage regions to work cooperatively to more efficiently address the transportation needs of the state, as well as the entire county. Regional cooperatives enhance the potential to leverage funds resulting in more transportation systems for the provided resources. Funding for a project can be justifiably allocated more for a set of counties or cities versus an individual county or city. Collaboration therefore is a key to funding through regionalism and addressing the transportation issues of a region.

Texas is an example of a state seeking additional methods of coordination and opportunities to address critical transportation issues. Bills were introduced in the legislature to address the implementation of Regional Mobility Districts or associations in the state. These bills address intermodalism, eminent domain and other issues associated with the acquisition of land for the development of a transportation project. The proposed bills address funding or how money collected will be allocated for transportation related projects. One bill, the Hilderbrand Bill recommended gas tax be raised to pay for projects. This particular bill did not pass, but House Bill 3588 did pass and explains how regional mobility authorities are to be implemented in the State of Texas.

House Bill 3588 relates to the construction, acquisition, financing, maintenance, management, operation, ownership, and control of transportation facilities. The bill also manages the progress, improvement, policing, and safety of transportation in the state imposing criminal penalties of those who don't comply (State of Texas, 2003). This bill is very important for the state of Texas to have as a guide for implementing an agency to manage transportation issues in multiple jurisdictions.

## **SUMMARY OF REGIONALISM SYMPOSIUM**

Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas, hosted a symposium on April 11, 2003 titled, "Does our Region Need a Multi-Modal Regional Transportation Authority?" Key transportation officials from TxDOT, METRO, The City of Houston, Harris County, Houston-

Galveston Area Council, Gulf Coast Institute, Greater Houston Partnership and professors from Rice University and Texas Southern University spoke about the benefits, disbenefits and multi-modal transportation components in the Houston area. Officials gathered to provide facts and opinions to attendees about regional decision-making.

The dialogue provided data about the growth in the Houston region, the expansion of boundaries as residents and businesses are constructed in newly developing areas, and the transportation infrastructure's challenge of trying to stay abreast of the demand to move people and goods in the region. As the region works to improve our roads, streets and public transportation systems, we must keep in mind the need to add capacity and to create and implement new and changing models that address our transportation future.

Planning for any urban area based on the future needs of the region requires a focus on implementing an efficient system. Future population growth and employment growth form the basis of design for transportation systems that address future needs. It is very important for planners to accommodate a system citizen's benefit from, whether they live or work in the core of the urban, suburban or adjacent rural areas. A good system facilitates connectivity between the varying parts of the region.

John Sedlak, Vice President of METRO, stated, "This city needs a multimodal as well as intermodal system. METRO proposed new enhanced bus services, the expansion of HOV lanes, new light rail and partnering for commuter rail as a multi-modal system. Sedlak stressed that transit is an important component of the regionalism concept.

Several speakers disagreed with the idea of a regional transportation authority. Michael W. Behrens, P.E., Executive Director of TXDOT, noted that Texas has over 80,000 miles of highways; in Houston 70 million miles are traveled in one day. He also stated that gas tax and voter registration fees are not sufficient to maintain the existing system and supported more funds for highways and toll roads. Toll roads generate revenue for highway improvements and maintenance as well as offer the opportunity to work with other agencies.

The Honorable Robert Eckels, Judge of Harris County and Chairman of the local MPO's Transportation Public Council, served as the keynote speaker. Judge Eckels said, "We do not need another level of government but we do need regional cooperation." Although participants advocated the concept of regional cooperation, which facilitates jurisdictions working together to address the transportation needs of the region, participants advocated utilizing the existing agency structures to perform that function. There seemed to be general consensus about the need for more transportation investment in the region and greater efforts at collaboration, but there was reluctance to welcoming another level of government to manage money and transportation projects being handled by the existing agencies. It was mentioned that regional cooperation already exists in Houston, but is not established on a single-agency basis.

## **SUMMARY**

Houston is the fourth largest city in the nation and is the core of a growing metropolitan area. It is important to address the transportation needs of the region as a whole. Models of regionalism from around the country provide examples of agencies working across jurisdictional lines and across modes. Regional cooperation, at its best, is better than any one agency trying to accommodate all tasks or all modes at one time. Based on existing regional transportation authorities, the idea might offer benefits depending on the local government goals and established agency relationships.

Cooperation among all agencies is key to comprehensively facing the increase in travel demand that will accompany growth. It is very apparent that transportation related issues have to be addressed in and around the Houston metropolitan area. The enormous amount of population growth expected in the Houston area, as well as expected increases in the employment base point to the critical nature of properly funding future projects in the area.

In order to minimize traffic congestion, alternative modes of transportation have to be implemented and constructed. The management of these projects may be coordinated over multiple jurisdictions and agencies, as well as modes. However, based on comments at this symposium, the Houston region will concentrate on seeking to increase funding and working

with the current agencies to coordinate and manage the elements of the transportation infrastructure.

*Note: A special thank-you to the Municipal Channel for airing the Dialogue on December 26, 2003 and January 9, 2004. A video-copy of the conference is available at the City of Houston's Municipal Channel under the title "Open Dialogue: Does Our Region Need A Multi-modal Regional Transportation Authority?" Phone # 832-3930-1270*



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