

Houston is the largest city in the state of Texas and the fourth-largest in the United States. As of 2006, the city had a population of 2.14 million and anchors a metropolitan area of 5.5¹ million people. Houston is the economic and cultural center of the western Gulf Coast Region and southeastern Texas. Over the past several decades the city has rapidly added population and developed in a low density autocentric form. Houston is well known for being the largest city in the nation with no zoning. This laissez-faire government structure allowing for the market to dictate urban form is one of the reasons why Houston has remained an affordable and viable place for people and businesses to relocate. However, the loosely regulated growth throughout Metropolitan Houston is having many negative impacts on the quality of life and poses serious implications to the future viability and livability of Houston in the future.

In most cities, zoning is one the most effective instruments used by planners to shape the built environment. However, since Houston and Harris County have no zoning powers, deed restrictions and ordinances are used as land use planning tools. Many planning decisions in Houston are made at the neighborhood level and are spear headed by non-profits such as the Gulf Coast Institute².

The Gulf Coast Institute (GCI) is an organization that seeks to create a livable community with a dynamic economy that revitalizes and protects neighborhoods, improves access, increases mobility choices, improves air and water quality,

¹ US Census Bureau

² Gulf Coast Institute.org

protects green space and natural resources, and builds a sense of place and community.

GCI brings to the region an entity committed to instilling sustainability in Houston's planning process. It leads and manages fundamental change in the broad discussions of urban growth and its implications on quality of life in Houston. The primary purpose of the group is to study the process of urban growth, to explore and communicate problems and possible solutions, and to foster dialogue and collaborative initiatives to improve the quality of the economy, community, and environment in the region. The basis of its work is the set of principles and concepts based on sustainable practices.

GCI creates links among leaders within public agencies, business associations, and nonprofit community organizations in order to share expertise and projects leading to a more livable community. GCI sponsors regular meetings, publishes an online magazine, maintains many Web sites, and actively disseminates educational information relevant to various.

GCI encourages community representatives to take leadership roles in initiatives that are intended to improve the health of the community as it grows. GSI provides education to these group on how their decisions can help make Houston a more livable city in all its meanings, including health, education, environment, physical development, mobility, and other important factors. GCI produces publications, studies, and plans that give Houstonians an alternative view to how urban growth has been shaped in the past and will be in the future.

Target Demographic

GCI collaborates with a diverse group of entities such as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the American Institute of Architects/Houston, Greater Houston Builders Association, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the Houston Homeowners Association, the Texas Southern University Center for Transportation, HARC Center for Global Studies, and many other community organizations. Strategic partners such as Texas Southern University (HBCU) allow the organization to engage Houston's many inner city African-American communities which have been historically left out of the planning process. The following is a list of examples of the many ways the Gulf Coast Institute creates alternative plans as well as education through publications, focus groups, and seminars:

- **Creation an alternative plans such as** the highly controversial freeway expansion plan set for I-10.
 - The current plan calls for 10 main lanes, 4 HOT Lanes and 6 lanes of frontage road (total: 21 lanes)
 - GCI plan called for a more modest expansion and commuter rail³
- **Imagine Houston**
 - 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.

³ www.houstonarchitecture.info, www.gulfcoastinstitute.org

- Each of the nine focus groups gathered information and wrote a paper on a specific topic on sustainability and livability
 - 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
- **Livable Houston Magazine⁴**
 - Online Magazine
 - Features various articles and essays on topics from housing, land use, transportation, all centered around principles of sustainability
- **Large Conferences**
 - Density by Design
 - This conference was held jointly with GCI, Houston-Galveston Area Council as well and The Texas Cooperative Extension
 - Covers topics such as metropolitan strategies, mixed-use financing, and transit-oriented design

⁴ www.livablehoustonmagazine.org

- **Livable Houston Meetings**
 - General discussion about current issues of sustainability in Houston
 - Presentations about innovations and concepts of sustainable principles
- **Houston Green Initiative⁵**
 - Committee dedicated to a green infrastructure system in Houston
 - Commissioned a study on the impact of lost tree coverage and the positive impact on rebuilding the canopy

Conclusion

The Gulf Coast Institute is an innovative organization which combines functions of a think-tank, research foundation, grass roots coalition and advocacy group. The alternative projects allow people to see how things might be different if they had been designed from a different viewpoint and philosophy. This gives the public a tangible alternative future.

Livable Houston Magazine brings new ideas to the public at large. The publication shows people that there is something other than status quo suburban style development in Houston and there are other more sustainable ways to create a livable city. The concepts in this magazine also allow people to create their own visions of a more livable city based on the sustainable concepts.

The conferences held by GCI allow Houstonians to become more active in their planning process. They are not only informative to the participants but the experts that speak at the conferences also become more enlightened about the

⁵ <http://www.gulfcoastinstitute.org/houstongreen/>

social context by listening to citizens. This further lessens the disconnect between politicians, planners, civic leaders and their public.

Overall, GCIs approach is holistic in nature. The approach covers many topics and allows the organization to be heard in many different mediums. Education and visioning are excellent means to empower the public and to promote social and environmental change. However, the organization should go further in strengthening its relationship with the city and other governments to ensure that there efforts can be realized for true substantive in change. Ideology is nice but results are better.