

TRANSITLINE

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Houston's METRO Rail at Main Street Square Station. The block-long fountain was funded by and is maintained by the Houston Downtown District.

Houston Planning for Next 25 Years

By Christine Luthi and Barbara Koslov

In 2001, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas, (METRO) embarked on a long-range planning process to enhance system connectivity and improve mobility in METRO's service area. The METRO Solutions plan provides the conceptual framework for transit development in the region over the next 25 years. Population projections indicate Harris County (Houston) will increase by 2 million new residents over the next 20 years and the eight-county metropolitan area will grow by 3 million. The goal of METRO Solutions was to identify the most appropriate transit capital and operating improvements.

METRO hired HDR|S.R. Beard & Associates to be the general planning consultant (GPC) for METRO Solutions. Two key elements of the planning process were developing a long-range program supported by the public and recognizing that the plan was financially constrained. The success of this planning effort was predicated on the ability of METRO to secure local and federal funding support. It was METRO's intent to use local matching funds to apply for federal grants; therefore, the projects identified in the plan were required to follow Federal Transit Administration (FTA) planning procedures. With the projects identified and prioritized, HDR|S.R. Beard & Associates' next objective was shepherding key projects through the FTA. This entailed managing the work efforts of Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (AA/DEIS) studies for three corridors and preparing subsequent New Starts applications.



Houston's METRO Rail serving the midday lunch and shopping crowd downtown.

HDR acquired S.R. Beard & Associates, LLC to deepen our transit capabilities. HDR/S.R. Beard & Associates provides clients a single source for comprehensive transportation planning and a full range of specialized services in transit program/project management.

Background

METRO Solutions incorporated technical and financial analysis as well as public input to identify 10 corridors exhibiting sufficient demand and community support to warrant consideration of Advanced High Capacity Transit (AHCT). Three corridors—North, Southeast and Uptown—showed strong growth potential, as well as community support to advance the development of AHCT. As a result, these three were recommended to proceed with detailed corridor development studies and Alternatives Analysis (AA). Six corridors determined to possess moderate growth potential were recommended to be studied as sub-area corridors. One remaining corridor study, in which only a portion of the corridor was in the METRO service area, was handled by the local metropolitan planning organization.

Project Management

METRO contracted with three consulting firms to conduct the AA studies for the North, Southeast and Uptown corridors. The remaining six sub-area corridor studies were

conducted by the GPC, which implemented a number of procedures to manage and focus all nine studies. The first was establishing weekly meetings with client and GPC staff to foster discussion and ensure the client's expectations for project development and progress were maintained.

Monthly project manager meetings between client staff, GPC and AA corridor consultant staff tracked schedule performance, progress, modeling, public involvement, system plan development, operations and maintenance costs and other issues related to the three AA studies. The objective was to keep the AA corridor consultant teams on-schedule and on-task, provide the client with a monthly overview of progress on the work and resolve issues as they were encountered.

A separate monthly meeting was held with the consultant teams for the sub-area corridors to achieve the same objective. Each corridor team also submitted weekly progress reports outlining work effort initiated and completed for the week and work effort anticipated for the forthcoming week. The GPC compiled and submitted these reports to the client along with details of its own accomplishments for the week. A matrix outlining the work products/deliverables of each corridor study provided a quick summary on the status of deliverables.

The GPC provided monthly briefings concerning the progress and development of METRO Solutions corridor studies to METRO's board of directors. In addition, the GPC helped METRO convene and inform the Planning Steering Committee and Interagency Steering Committee at regularly scheduled meetings. The group comprised representatives from METRO, Houston-Galveston Area Council, Texas Department of Transportation, City of Houston, Planning and Engineering, Harris County Toll Road Authority and the Houston Airport System.

Meetings were held on a regular basis and were designed to serve as a forum to coordinate transportation planning and project development activities among the transportation providers in the region, as well as provide updates on METRO Solutions. The GPC also provided regular briefings to the Greater Houston Partnership transit committees, the Mayor of Houston, Houston City Council and Harris County Commissioners Court and offered on-call availability for briefings to federal elected officials.

Strategies Employed

In addition to overseeing work progress and coordinating meetings, the GPC actively guided METRO Solutions' program development and planning analysis. Management of the project included not only oversight of the study process, but also technical support and input as part of the work program. The GPC provided technical skills at all levels of plan development and was accessible to deal with a variety of issues or conflicts that arose throughout the course of conducting the corridor studies.

Knowledge of the federal process was essential to managing the study program and keeping the work effort focused and on-task. With an eye toward meeting federal guidelines, the key study variables were thoroughly analyzed and documented. In addition, the GPC provided travel demand forecasting for all of the corridor studies. This facilitated a consistent approach to running the model, analyzing the network and establishing the baseline for individual corridors and the regional system.

Understanding local issues and the political environment was necessary for effectively incorporating key regional concerns. While each corridor had a separate project manager and study team, the GPC coordinated an overall team effort to analyze and assemble specific elements of the plan, such as analyzing alternatives, conducting environmental analysis, performing conceptual engineering and coordinating an extensive public involvement program. Coordination between client and consultants led to a transit plan that responded to both METRO's and the metropolitan region's transit needs and service objectives.

Public outreach served as an integral component by creating an open process with ample opportunity to inform, educate and involve individuals; neighborhood, business and civic organizations; affected agencies; and local jurisdictions.

This public involvement process was employed in each of the AA corridors and by the GPC, which provided an overall global view of the METRO Solutions Transit System Plan to the community. After the initial public kick-off meeting, agency and public scoping meetings were held. This included 78 public meetings to present METRO Solutions to locations spanning the METRO service area. Hundreds of stakeholder meetings were staged at regular intervals to inform chambers of commerce, civic and homeowner groups and other interested parties of major project milestones. Each AA corridor had a Stakeholder Advisory Committee that met regularly and reviewed study progress. A project Web site, project newsletters and press releases, informational mail-out pieces, focus groups, a speakers bureau, comment cards and a project database were just some of the public outreach tools used by the GPC.

Conclusion

The METRO Solutions Transit System Plan was adopted by the METRO board of directors on July 31, 2003. On November 4, 2003, voters in the Houston metropolitan area elected to support the plan with 52 percent of votes being cast in favor of METRO Solutions. HDR|S.R. Beard & Associates now is assisting METRO in taking the necessary steps to implement METRO Solutions and secure federal grant funding.

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Houston's Northwest Freeway HOV lane. METRO operates 113 miles of reversible HOV lanes on five regional highways during peak hours to accommodate suburban commuters.