



VISION PROGRESS ASSESSMENT

Prepared for Envision Central Texas

July 2008

Background

Envision Central Texas (ECT) is a non-profit organization created in 2001 to assist in the development of a common vision to address growth in Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis and Williamson Counties. This was the first time in the history of this region that individuals representing businesses, civic organizations, developers, local governments, environmental organizations, transportation organizations and neighborhoods came together to spearhead a regional vision. Today, the mission of ECT is to serve as a catalyst for regional cooperation and planning to advance Central Texas' Vision for the future.

Key Elements of the Vision

- An effective transportation system that improves mobility throughout the region, increases transportation choices, including roads, rail, trails and bikeways, and is coordinated with land use planning.
- Protection of our environment and natural resources so we will have the open space, parks and trails that people cherish, preserve our ecologically sensitive land and ensure sustainable clean water and air for future generations.
- A diverse and thriving economy with a robust base of businesses and quality job opportunities for citizens and a distribution of jobs throughout the region.
- A variety of housing choices, affordable for everyone in the region and offering a mix of styles, such as neighborhoods with pedestrian-friendly streets or housing that is within walking distance to transit and stores.
- Preservation of our region's unique character by protecting and enhancing our neighborhoods, towns, rural areas, historic sites, and special sense of place.
- An understanding that social equity and racial harmony are core values that strengthen us and actions that foster respect, civility, and opportunities for all.
- A region-wide understanding that our fortunes are tied together requiring planning, participation and collaboration by stakeholders throughout our region to ensure a successful and livable future for Central Texas.

Executive Summary

During the five years since Envision Central Texas (ECT) began its planning process, Central Texas has continued to grow at an astonishing rate. The projection for population growth remains on track for a doubling of the population between 2000 and 2020. Even as we approach what might become a prolonged recession, the Central Texas economy shows remarkable resiliency. A much smaller proportion of Central Texas homes were financed by sub-prime mortgages, the unemployment rate remains low, and the region is seen as a magnet for talent.

To mark the five-year milestone, the ECT board directed a review of "progress-on-goals" to determine how well the region is meeting the demands of its continued growth. Towards this end, the leadership of ECT engaged TIP Strategies, Inc. to assist in the preparation of a Vision Progress Assessment. To accomplish this task, TIP worked with ECT staff and leadership to conduct a detailed series of interviews with local businesses, institutions, and public officials. In addition, the team conducted focus groups and public workshops, and administered online questionnaires. This report summarizes those findings.

Key Findings

The respondents' perception of change in Central Texas, as well as the work remaining to be done, depended on the lens through which progress is viewed. For public sector agencies and planning officials, the context of the discussion is land use. For private sector employers, competitiveness is the lynch pin. Residents weighed in on the limitations of the region's transportation network and expressed their strong desire to maintain a regional and local identity, but had different opinions as to the solutions required.

Despite the differing viewpoints of participants in the Vision Progress Assessment, a number of clear themes emerged. Perhaps most important was **an appreciation of the need for greater**

coordination on regional issues. For many public sector groups, the major issues facing Central Texas today are the same as those facing the region five to ten years ago – only magnified. The lack of a coordinated approach to infrastructure planning in the region – one that is tied to land use planning and that breaks down traditional “silos” – is seen by those in both the public and private sector as a barrier to achieving regional goals. This feeling was echoed by participants in the public workshop and respondents to the on-line survey. Of the nearly 700 local residents who took the survey, 92 percent felt that communities could do a better job of coordinating their planning efforts, with three-quarters of respondents in agreement that “ensuring collaboration among jurisdictions” is the best way to implement the Vision. Paradoxically, when forced to prioritize the seven elements of the Vision, improving regional collaboration was ranked the lowest.

On the positive side, the Vision Progress Assessment suggests that **communities throughout the region believe in the tenets of ECT.** Of local officials who responded to the on-line survey, 100 percent agreed there is “value in having a regional vision for the future.” Four out of five agreed that the existing Vision is “relevant” to their community and more than half (57 percent) reported that the regional Vision is a consideration in their planning decisions. Interviews throughout the region illustrate the support for ECT principles among city officials. Many want to embrace higher density, primary job employment close to home, transit hubs, walkable communities, pedestrian pathways, and a sense of place that reflects the community’s character. Among Central Texas residents who participated in the survey, 95 percent saw value in a regional approach.

While there is agreement in principle, it is clear that Central Texas communities each has its own idea of how it wants to grow. Significantly, **many communities lack the necessary resources to plan for their growth** – and as a result are being planned *by* growth. The lack of planning resources is most evident outside the I-35 corridor. These outlying areas are often the most concerned about preserving their unique character. However, they typically lack the tools – future land use plans, comprehensive plans, land development codes, utility and transportation impact fees, park plans – that would help them define and implement their residents’ vision of how growth should occur. These communities need capacity-building assistance if they are to achieve a community vision that fits within the ECT Vision.

Growth is inevitable and desirable, but destruction of community character is not. The question is not whether your part of the world is going to change. The question is how.

Edward T. McMahon, ULI Fellow

For unincorporated areas **the problem is magnified by the lack of land use authority at the county level.** This is not news. Every legislative session for the last decade has failed to see results on this front. What is different now than 10 years ago is that the general citizenry in Central Texas sees the benefits of increased land use regulatory authority for counties. Without that authority, development will continue to swallow swaths of land without regard to transportation or the environment. For some, there is a sense that development in the region has already overrun the Vision, since much of the land in unincorporated areas is already platted.

Not surprisingly, the environment was a constant theme throughout the Vision Progress Assessment. There is general recognition among all sectors that the natural environment is one of Central Texas’s most important assets. Public officials cited bond proposals to preserve open space as among the most important accomplishments in the last five years. Protecting the region’s environment and natural resources ranked second only to improving the transportation system among respondents to the citizen survey. While concerns were expressed about open space preservation and the impacts of changing air quality standards, **concerns about water quality dominated environmental discussions.** The lack of county planning authority was cited as a key barrier to this goal. Specifically, much of the development with adverse effects on water quality is occurring in unincorporated areas.

What are the most important issues to address to ensure a positive future for Central Texas? (Select three)

Transportation/Congestion	66.6%
Land use	34.1%
Cost of living	30.9%
Water availability	28.2%
Air quality	27.8%
Parks/Open space	25.6%
Public education	23.6%
Jobs	22.0%
Water quality	21.3%
Housing choices	10.3%
Farm land preservation	9.7%
Public safety	9.0%
Health care	8.7%
Social equity	6.8%
Racial issues	1.5%

SOURCE: Results of on-line survey of Central Texas residents.

The single topic raised most often was transportation. While some progress was noted, specifically the construction of new roadways (State Highway 130 and others) and the future passenger rail line, there was agreement across the board that **much more remains to be done to improve the region's transportation system.**

Among those responding to the on-line citizen survey, addressing transportation issues and congestion was viewed as the number one factor affecting the region's future. Two out of three respondents ranked it as one of their top three priorities, well above the next closest factors – land use and cost of living, which received top three rankings by 34 percent and 31 percent of respondents, respectively. When asked to rate progress on the seven Vision elements, area residents ranked transportation last, with just 15 percent of respondents giving the region positive marks during the last five years. Given the option, respondents would dedicate \$35.38 of every \$100 spent on improving the transportation system. Bringing Caldwell and Bastrop Counties into the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (the agency charged with developing long-range transportation plans for the region) was seen as a critical step in improving the effectiveness of regional planning. Consolidating planning responsibilities, or at least promoting better coordination between CAMPO and the Capital Area Council of Governments, was mentioned by members

of the development community and citizens. For citizens and planning officials, increasing options for alternative transportation, including bicycle infrastructure and rail, were priorities.

The question of whether Central Texas was reaching a “tipping point” — a point where immediate action was needed — elicited very different responses. Some felt that the region was already in crisis, that it had tipped away from a sustainable future. Others felt that we were far from any situation that demanded immediate action. These viewpoints inevitably reflected the values of the respondent and their expectations both for what Central Texas *was*, and what it might become.

The bottom line for communities in Central Texas relating to the ECT Vision, is that they would like to grow in a manner consistent with the tenants of the Vision – even as many cities lack the resources to do so.

About the Vision Progress Assessment

Central Texas is recognized as one of the most desirable places to live in the United States. The five-county Central Texas Region is expected to add another million people over the next 20 to 40 years. Preserving the region's quality of life in the face of continued growth is a tremendous challenge. The demands that accompany this growth require us to address such issues as how and where land is developed for housing and jobs, the types of homes we live in, how we travel around the region and how we preserve and protect our environment.

Background

To address these questions, the regional leadership engaged citizens in one of the largest conversations ever to occur in Texas about how to shape future growth. This conversation was led by Envision Central Texas (ECT), a 501-C3 non-profit organization created in 2001 by leaders representing business, environment, neighborhoods

Envision Central Texas Milestones

September 2001	Incorporation
Summer 2002	Community input
Fall 2002	Public workshops
Spring 2003	Community test site workshops
Fall 2003	Regional survey
February 2004	Leadership workshop
May 2004	Launch of the Vision
Fall 2004	New Leadership
January 2005	Implementation begins
November 2005	SH 130 Corridor Summit
May 2006	Inaugural ECT Community Stewardship Awards Luncheon
Winter 2007	Launch of Quality Growth Toolbox
Spring 2008	Central Texas Greenprint for Growth Begins

and government in the five-county Central Texas Region. From 2002 to 2004 thousands of residents participated in focus groups, workshops, surveys and educational forums as part of the Envision Central Texas process. Their input and ideas formed the basis of the Vision for Central Texas which includes multiple choices of transportation and housing, compact walkable communities in key nodes, abundant open spaces and recreation opportunities and a strong emphasis on social equity and preservation of our region's unique character and history.

As part of their ongoing implementation efforts, ECT has been working to educate and engage the region's leaders about planning for the future in ways that move toward the Vision. ECT has also created six committees to further its work, created web-based tools and resources, and continues to help shape growth in a sustainable way. Combined with the Community Stewardship Awards, ECT enjoys high visibility among select audiences.

Purpose & Scope

It has now been five years since ECT began the visioning process. Since that time, the region has experienced numerous changes including the addition of significant new roadways (Highway 183A and State Highway 130) and commuter rail service (scheduled to start in 2008). The five-year milestone is an ideal time to

assess the progress the region has made towards implementing the ECT Vision and to identify the key priorities for moving forward. The goal of the Vision Progress Assessment initiative is to help the region understand where we are today relative to the Vision and what implementation efforts are needed.

To help accomplish this task, the ECT leadership engaged TIP Strategies (TIP) to conduct one-on-one interviews with top management at public and private entities throughout the region to get a sense of their connection to the Vision and understand future plans that may affect the region as a whole. These 26 interviews represent employers in a mix of key industries, including healthcare, technology, and education. Public leaders were identified from each of the five counties, as well as organizations with regional planning responsibilities, such as transportation and water. The interviews were conducted as open-ended discussions about how Central Texas has changed in the last five years. Participants were asked to share their thoughts about the future – including whether or not there was a “tipping point” with regard to their ability to function in the region. Officials were asked to consider whether ECT goals were reflected in their own policies and their own understanding of what matters to the region.

Findings from the interviews were supplemented by on-line surveys soliciting feedback from area citizens, public officials, and human resource managers throughout Central Texas. In addition, TIP facilitated focus groups with stakeholders in the development community, environmental organizations, and civic and neighborhood leaders throughout the region. To provide additional opportunities to engage citizens, ECT staff conducted eight public workshops in the five counties. Along with providing an overview of findings to-date and an analysis of key data indicators, the workshops provided a forum for residents to discuss their concerns about conditions in their area as well as in the region as a whole. Participants were asked to describe the biggest changes they have experienced in their community during the last five years (both positive and negative) and to weigh in on whether their community is growing in a way that will make it an attractive place to live in 20 years. Attendees were also asked to write a “one-minute essay” on ways that ECT can help address the issues they feel are most important. The results of this initiative will guide the planning efforts of ECT, helping to craft a new agenda. In addition, a separate addendum that updates regional data sets, prepared by ECT staff, will be made available under separate cover.

What We Learned

The Vision Progress Assessment was designed to capture perceptions of public agencies, private businesses, and area residents about where they see the region today. It is difficult to generalize these results since what is presented here cannot be interpreted as the “definitive” view of each sector. It can, however, help to provide a sense of progress-on-goal among various constituencies in the region.

Findings from the personal interviews, focus groups, public workshops, and surveys were distilled into five major areas: economic development; transportation; environment and natural resources; housing; quality of life and preserving the area’s unique character.

For each topic, the discussion has been organized to address the following questions;

- What has changed in the last five years?
- What challenges or barriers remain?
- What is the future outlook?

We feel this framework answers the question of progress-on-goal, while also identifying where ECT can play an important role in moving the Vision forward.

Economic Development

• **Related ECT Vision Element:** A diverse and thriving economy with a robust base of businesses and quality job opportunities for citizens and a distribution of jobs throughout the region.

What has changed in the last five years?

Over the course of many business interviews, there was surprising unanimity on the question of economic development in Central Texas. Without exception, major (and minor) employers felt that we were doing better – or much better – than we had five years ago. What changed for the better was the range of available jobs (at all income levels). There was a general sense that major employers were better able to attract talent. In part, this was due to the *relative* affordability of Austin and its suburbs when compared to other technology centers in the U.S. (and worldwide). In fact, this point is an important one to convey.

In all discussions of economic development, the competitive position of Central Texas was a constant theme. This perspective was especially prominent for economic development, but it also arose in housing and transportation discussions. To make the same point somewhat differently, there is an absolute sense in which the environment can be said to have improved or to have deteriorated. The economy, however, is *always* seen through the lens of relative advantage. As a consequence, employers were answering the question of Central Texas’ progress by comparison with the other major labor draw areas for skilled workers (especially in technology). This included wage rates, cost of living, business-related regulatory issues, time-to-work, housing costs, education and training opportunities, and the amenities enjoyed by workers of all pay scales.

Public sector interviewees also gave the region good marks with regard to progress on economic development goals. Most elected officials have seen their local economies prosper over the last five years. For rural and suburban counties, residential growth over the last five years has increased significantly as larger subdivisions have sprouted across rural countrysides. Retail has started to follow those rooftops in places like Hays County, Williamson County and Bastrop County. Caldwell County has not seen much retail or commercial growth yet it is

imminent with the development of State Highway 130 going through the county. For Travis County, the residential infill growth has been phenomenal but they have lost significant portions of office space to suburban markets.

What challenges or barriers remain?

The barriers perceived by smaller companies are not the same as those of major employers. For large companies, there are macroeconomic considerations that will affect them sooner than regional issues. Major semiconductor companies are looking at worldwide demand for their product. They face consolidation questions (which ties them to corporate decisions they may not be able to influence directly).

Smaller companies have wage scale concerns and the cost of doing business is not as easy to manage when the customer base is not firmly established. Consequently, the competitiveness of Central Texas is more immediately tied to worker availability (in other words, it's not as easy for them to recruit).

The biggest economic development challenge the public sector faces is growing in a balanced and equitable manner. The assets each community has in the region are diverse - as are the types of industries that each community has or tries to foster. Some believe that economic development in suburban and rural areas in the region is haphazard – that there is no plan for what infrastructure is needed to support specific industry types. Several individuals suggest that a regional educational reform with a focus on specific industry types may get the region to embrace regional economic development. More systematic regional economic development planning may be necessary to determine what types of industries the region should foster, and what are appropriate industries for different communities, given their labor force and quality of place interests.

Opportunity Austin, a five-year economic development initiative launched by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce (GACC), describes itself as a regional economic development strategy. While the GACC works hard to take a regional approach seriously, there is still the perception that its impact is mostly felt in Travis County and a select few outlier communities. This perception risks widening the divide between Austin and the outlying communities.

Many areas in the region lack an organization that spearheads, or even looks out for, their economic interests. For example, most of the Del Valle Independent School District is in unincorporated areas. Very little higher-end housing has been built in the district – much to the chagrin of the DVISD. Employment growth within their service area has been mostly industrial, thus reinforcing the blue collar labor force and lower end housing that dominates the school district. The recent Villa Muse project was something the district very much wanted for tax base purposes, and for the higher paying jobs they felt would have stimulated higher-end housing. Without an organization focused on economic interests for the school district, they had little voice in the matter.

While the 4A/4B sales tax initiatives were not a specific topic of discussion, their effect has significant repercussions for regional economic development planning. The dependence of many Texas communities on the retail sales tax has several consequences, not the least of which is the aggressive pursuit of retail by suburban communities. Economic development corporations in these communities are directly funded through the 4A/4B sales tax provisions, as a result, the attraction of retail developments is often a significant focus. Retail centers, in turn, have a significant impact on the built environment. Urban development patterns are heavily influenced by the scale and location of retail centers. Where retail centers locate matters to infrastructure investments: to transportation and to sewer and water. In effect, every major retail development goes forward with direct and indirect public support. This support is based on assumptions and values that are often not articulated, but which run squarely into the concerns of neighborhoods, environmental groups, or other developers. A regional economic development strategy could influence future growth across a broad economic and social spectrum.

What is the future outlook?

The concerns expressed related to maintaining the region's competitive advantage. The Austin Chamber was widely praised for its focus on economic development, and for maintaining that advantage. Closer cooperation between ECT and the chamber was seen as a necessity if economic development is to remain on the ECT agenda.

Other elements of the business interviews on this topic included the importance of green technology to the region's future. This was prominent to at least three companies, and most interviewees attached significance to this sector as a regional economic development opportunity.

Most public officials interviewed were positive about the outlook, even with a recession looming. The housing crisis talked about in the news has not been felt too much in suburban Central Texas. Dripping Springs, for example, has a waiting list for waste water taps (Living Unit Equivalents, or LUEs) and their average housing under construction is \$300,000+. Central Austin property values and home sale price appreciation has plateaued, yet our region's median home price is still lower than the national average – while our economy continues to be one of the best in the country. Our home prices are highly likely to stay ahead of the U.S. median price, while remaining relatively affordable against many similar high-growth regions.

All fear the region's *tipping point* will be when traffic congestion negatively influences the region's economic growth, which some argue is happening now. Traffic congestion is already viewed as a factor forcing residents to consider home-based occupations. Several communities have noticed an increase in home-based workers over the last few years and are tweaking their land development ordinances to ensure they are accommodating the growth of this emerging segment of the labor pool.

Public sector interviews also highlighted the importance of understanding what industries each community or county is trying to promote in a regional strategy. Not all of the industries targeted by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce's *Opportunity Austin* initiative are practical for some of the region's suburban communities – given the disparities of infrastructure or labor force compositions. Workforce and education providers in the region try to focus on specific occupations or industry sectors and most economic development organizations (but clearly not all of them) have a specific focus for their economic development efforts. However, there is still a divide between the economic development organizations and workforce providers.

Many communities in the region do not have a full-scale economic development program and lack the resources to develop one. As a consequence, they are forced to react to individual business requests without a coordinated incentive policy. Infrastructure and workforce issues are often left vague and unresolved. The linkage between workforce providers, city and county officials, businesses, and economic developers could improve significantly. Without this linkage, regional growth and labor force needs may well be at odds.

What many in the region are excited about – both in the public and private sector – are the burgeoning industries of green building and sustainable energy. While Austin has become a national model for certain initiatives, other communities over the next decade will be embracing similar strategies. These initiatives, while promoting a sustainable growth, will also stimulate the industry sectors involved in sustainable development. This is expected to include the green building industry (concrete forms, structurally insulated panels) and clean energy (solar and wind energy). All of these industries require research and design, as well as manufacturing – providing jobs for many sectors of our labor force.

Transportation

● **Related ECT Vision Element:** An effective transportation system that improves mobility throughout the region, increases transportation choices, including roads, rail, trails and bikeways, and is coordinated with land use planning.

What has changed in the last five years?

Not surprisingly, the subject of transportation engendered passionate responses. Traffic congestion and increased commuter times weigh heavily on public officials and area residents. While more roads have been built (including State Highway 45, State Highway 130, Highway 183A) and more transportation plans (regional and local) have been created over the last five years, it is evident without looking at data or charts that more people are on the roads. According to the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce's "Take on Traffic" campaign, seventy cars are added to Central Texas roadways every day, adding up to about 25,000 annually. At the same time, fewer dollars are available to fund transportation projects and creative financing mechanisms are becoming more of the norm.

According to the Texas Department of Transportation, revenues are not keeping pace with expenditures.

- Between 2001- 2004, outlays exceeded receipts by \$2-4 billion each year
- Estimated outlays for FY 2007 – FY 2009 exceed estimated receipts by more than \$3 billion each year.

Alternative transit has also made strides since the initial Vision was launched. Commuter rail in Austin was approved and station area plans are being developed. By the beginning of 2009 trains are expected to be carrying passengers from Leander to downtown Austin. The regional Austin-San Antonio Commuter Rail has also made significant headway by finalizing interlocal agreements with nearly every county and city along the regional commuter rail tracks; discussions with Union Pacific about rail relocation have made some progress; and many cities have designated specific areas for the commuter rail stations. Many communities have designated transit hubs in their respective community plans. In addition, more bike lanes have been developed, or are planned for, in cities throughout Central Texas. Bicycle coalitions have been formed in several cities and more cyclists are on the roadways.

Most of the businesses interviewed felt that significant progress had been made on transportation since the early years of the decade. The toll roads came up in every conversation. For some employers, particularly those located in Williamson County, the improvements were dramatic. Other companies saw only marginal improvement. Oddly perhaps, smaller companies saw transportation as being a significantly greater problem than it had been. Few saw rail as a significant alternative to alleviating congestion.

Private sector views on transportation were, once again, based on a competitive standpoint. From this perspective, the region was seen as doing more to address transportation than many competitor regions. The *rate* at which traffic congestion is increasing in Seattle, Portland, Silicon Valley, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Boston is not as great as it is in Central Texas, but overall congestion is still less. Nevertheless, certain obvious options have not gained traction. Vanpool interest has not been met, even as workers become increasingly conscious of commute costs.

What challenges or barriers remain?

Central Texas's transportation challenges are multi-faceted. Funding more transportation infrastructure is easily the biggest immediate challenge. Yet, the long-term challenge is changing the mindsets of businesses, workers, students, and others by helping them understand that there are options other than driving and that their choices make a difference.

If you had \$100 to spend on addressing the regional priorities identified, how would you divide it among the following?

Developing an effective transportation system	\$35.38
Protecting the environment and natural resources	\$24.24
Promoting a diverse and thriving economy	\$14.47
Providing a variety of housing choices	\$10.72
Preserving the region's unique character	\$11.58
Fostering social equity and racial harmony	\$8.79
Regional collaboration among jurisdictions	\$8.40

SOURCE: Results of on-line survey of Central Texas residents.

Communities would also benefit from an increased awareness of options. Many communities in the region still do not understand the connection between land use and transportation problems – allowing many curb cuts along city roads, or promoting separate-use areas rather than mixed-use developments, or not planning for safe bike lanes or pedestrian areas. For other communities, the challenge lies in their ability to participate in transit opportunities. A number of Central Texas communities are not in Capital Metro's service area, at times due to an inability to designate sales tax for transit (because local sales taxes are already allocated for other purposes, such as

economic development). Figuring out how to allow these communities to be part of local transit improvements while maintaining funds for economic development or other local initiatives could be a significant factor in improving mobility region-wide.

Many communities in the region have an interest in promoting multi-modal transportation, yet lack the resources to address specific projects. One community identified a "Transit Hub" on a draft downtown plan. When queried, however, they could not identify what that meant in a specific way. They did, however, feel they needed to accommodate a "hub" for commuters. This same community is not part of Capital Metro.

An important reference point is that sales tax in Texas is limited to 8.25% (including 6% assessed by the state). That leaves 2.25% that can be assessed by a local community. Many communities in the region have devoted this extra levee to economic development sales tax, property relief, or other local endeavors. With no additional sales tax to levee, these communities cannot participate in Capital Metro's programs. Capital Metro has, however, recently taken steps to allow a "payment for services" option for communities who can't add the tax.

Preserving the integrity of the Austin-San Antonio Commuter Rail station sites was also mentioned as a critical challenge for the region. Some cities are still not convinced that the commuter rail line will happen, or are simply not sure how to go about planning for these areas from a land use and transportation perspective. Several communities on the commuter rail line fear that these stations will simply serve as an export vehicle of their labor to serve the Austin economy. Proper planning around the stations – promoting dense, mixed-use employment centers at the stations –can serve as an importer of labor, while at the same time providing more jobs for existing residents.

Integrating other forms of transportation into the highway system was a major concern. Businesses first consider access questions for their workers (commute time). They have a less direct stake in overall congestion. That barrier may not be eased significantly by alternative transportation options. While no one opposed rail (commuter or light rail), none saw it as having a dramatic benefit for their company. Some firms saw a need for more emphasis on van pooling, shuttle services, or other transportation options.

More important than alternative transportation options was the opinion that road and highway *management* was seriously lacking. It was felt that the way in which vehicular traffic was being handled could be greatly improved (capacity was potentially much higher if off- and on-ramps matched demand, i.e., bottlenecks at interchanges). More generally, the relationship of the region to TxDOT design and planning was felt to be inadequate.

In addition, traditional approaches cannot be dismissed. Major transportation projects continue to be announced by communities across the country, highlighting the fact that, while better land use planning and more mobility choices are priorities, traditional infrastructure projects will still be a necessary element of improving our transportation systems.

What is the future outlook?

In virtually every forum – interviews, focus groups, on-line surveys – transportation was mentioned as one of the top concerns for the region. For citizens who participated in the on-line survey, addressing the area's transportation system was ranked most often among the top three “most important issues to address to ensure a positive future for Central Texas.” When asked to distribute a hypothetical \$100 among the seven Vision elements, respondents allocated roughly one out of every three dollars (\$35.38) to “developing an effective transportation system.”

There is little agreement, however, on what an effective system would look like. Citizen comments were weighted more towards development of mass transit solutions, although there was a strong contingent advocating for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, and a minority who favored more road building as a solution. However, in contrast to the private sector's views, virtually all comments that mentioned toll roads in citizen forums were negative.

Elected officials were also divided as to what steps would best position the region to improve mobility. Officials in some rural areas are excited about new roadways, such as State Highway 130, believing that more roadways will open up new land for development. For others, solutions to the region's future transportation needs lie in developing more mobility choices, planning developments near transit hubs, planning more bike lanes, and coordinating rural and urban commuter options, including the Austin-San Antonio Commuter Rail. Across the board, there is a sense that linking economic, land use, and transportation planning will be essential.

One way this question was addressed for the private sector was to determine whether there was a tipping point after which transportation in the region needed to be completely re-thought. From a competitive standpoint, the answer was “not yet.” At least one company reported that employees will sometimes leave if they are moved to facilities too far from their residence. The lack of emphasis on transportation issues among major employers interviewed should not be interpreted to mean that any of them felt we should ignore the problem. In fact, one company official pointed to the “major employers summit” on transportation issues spearheaded by Seton as evidence of interest in developing a comprehensive regional transportation system.

Workforce Housing

● **Related ECT Vision Element:** A variety of housing choices, affordable for everyone in the region and offering a mix of styles, such as neighborhoods with pedestrian-friendly streets or housing that is within walking distance to transit and stores.

What has changed in the last five years?

Transportation infrastructure and houses are the most obvious physical manifestations of growth in Central Texas. The type of housing that is sprouting up throughout the region varies considerably depending on the school systems, the infrastructure, the employment opportunities, and the quality of place that attracts individuals to communities in the first place. Although more housing choices exist in the region, perhaps most notably the tremendous growth in downtown housing, affordability has become a significant issue in many areas. Escalating land and home values in Travis County have pushed many to the suburbs.

Discussions of the availability of housing options elicited a wide range of response among employers. For some, the relatively low cost of housing in Central Texas (compared to competitor areas) made it easier to attract employees. For other firms, there was growing concern for the rising costs of housing in and around downtown Austin. At least one respondent talked about being unable to retain employees because they could not afford housing close to the place of employment – meaning unacceptably long commutes.

Many outlying communities still want better quality housing for executives and managers, in addition to, or rather than, affordable housing. Elected officials and the general public believe (and rightly so) that with better schools and better higher-end housing choices, their ability to attract higher-end businesses will grow.

What challenges or barriers remain?

Public sector interviews suggest that regional affordable housing initiatives should become a major focus. There are few resources and few individuals in rural areas to help communities develop mixed-income housing, low-income housing, and public-private partnerships for affordable housing development. Communities outside the I-35 corridor often do not have community housing development organizations (CHDOs) who can determine affordability needs and pursue federal funding for affordable family housing. This is an area where additional resources could spawn significant positive results. One community stated that senior affordable housing is their most critical housing need. They also were unaware of the significant amount of federal funding for senior affordable housing.

The cost of worker housing (defined here as non-managerial employees) is a growing concern among the private sector. It is also affecting other employers, such as the University of Texas, where increasing costs are pushing faculty and staff further from campus lengthening commute times and lowering staff productivity.

However, costs were not the only factor affecting housing decisions for employees. Many businesses highlighted the relationship between housing options and the quality of schools. It was naïve, they felt, not to see strong schools as part of the housing equation. In many cases, the first question employees of technology companies have is whether their children will be well-served by the local school district. Value was seen in the Austin Independent School District's academic "magnet" programs (at Kealing and Fulmore Middle Schools and LBJ High School), although a better understanding of school options was still lacking. To state this in a different way, how school districts are perceived has a direct influence on the residential choices employees make. Affordable housing, distance to work, and other factors may play a secondary role to the expectation for quality schools.

What is the future outlook?

The long-term trend towards continued population growth cannot help but exacerbate rising housing costs. Two national trends, however, will need to be factored in: rising fuel costs and declining real estate prices. Neither trend is certain to continue (however likely it may seem). And lower housing costs are not reflected in the Central Texas market. Understandably, business leaders were cautious on how this might influence development patterns or what it would mean for transportation. Dissatisfaction with bus routes and highway and road planning was pervasive. This suggested that there was more to be done with what was already available to the region.

The general citizenry and elected leadership expressed concern about housing, and how their lack of either affordable or higher-end housing will impact their ability to grow, to attract business, and to increase their tax base.

Environment (Water)

● **Related ECT Vision Element:** Protection of our environment and natural resources so we will have the open space, parks and trails that people cherish, preserve our ecologically sensitive land and ensure sustainable clean water and air for future generations.

What has changed in the last five years?

Arguably, the most important development is the growing public awareness of the impacts of climate change. Every corporation interviewed, as well as the University of Texas, saw a strong desire on the part of employees (and students) to take a stand on global warming. For some businesses, carbon neutrality was an expressed goal. One local company has become a dominant player in the solar energy industry, although with little notice in the region. LEED-rated construction (which meets higher energy efficiency and sustainability standards) was high on everyone's agenda – even if certification was not sought.

The best way to express the change over the last five years is to say that national (and international) interest in climate-related issues has shifted the debate on the environment. What were once thought of as primarily local issues are now seen in a global context. In addition, companies see that there is a business case to be made for conservation and the technologies that support it. Rising energy costs demand a response and this response fits well with a desire to address environmental concerns.

The availability and quality of the region's water supply has also gained a prominent place in the environmental debate. Important milestones in regional water planning have occurred across Central Texas. Senate Bill 1, the comprehensive "bottom up" water planning legislation enacted by the 75th Texas Legislature, and its predecessor Senate Bill 2 have nearly played out. Existing water supplies have been evaluated against projected needs, spurring a frenzy of activity as private, public and non-profit groups positioned themselves for water rights.

Some communities have worked well with local water supply corporations and regional water supply providers (such as the Lower Colorado River Authority and the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority) in developing regional water supply programs. Others are not so fortunate, such as in northern Williamson County or Caldwell County where there are more than a handful of water supply corporations and private developers vying for water and trying to plan area growth.

The use of rainwater catchment systems has also become more mainstream in some areas of Central Texas. Many communities west of I-35, and especially in Hays County, have adopted measures promoting their use and even allowing the use of rainwater for potable water in some areas. Landscape ordinances promoting the use of indigenous plants and trees – which require less water than non-native species – have also gained in popularity.

The loss of agricultural and ranch lands to development was a concern voiced in public workshops, although little mention was made in other forums.

What challenges or barriers remain?

The relationship of land use to the environment was a recurring theme. Higher density development patterns were seen as beneficial to water availability and water costs. "If the levels in the aquifer drop, developers have no access to water to build." Lack of coordination among planning efforts and lack of county land use controls that mitigate environmental impacts were seen as the biggest challenges to protecting Central Texas's natural environment. While partnerships may form on an ad hoc basis to address specific concerns, there is no

requirement under the current system for land use or environmental resource plans to be coordinated across the region.

Developers are, presumably, meeting a market demand and playing by the existing rules. Water authorities provide them water and the developments get built. Water supply corporations are required by state law to provide water when requested – without regard to local interests. Regional water and wastewater providers are in a similar position – providing water to areas in unincorporated areas or in the ETJ (extraterritorial jurisdiction) of cities when requested. It is important to understand that septic tanks are used where there is no centralized wastewater, and the state and counties regulate lot size for septic tanks (generally 1 acre or larger per unit), and centralized wastewater is not possible without a steady and plentiful supply of water. Water supply alone does not allow denser development – it is wastewater that allows a developer to build denser areas. There is no regional plan for providing water and wastewater. Without county land use controls and a coordinated infrastructure plan that includes transportation, water and wastewater – all to promote growth in specific areas – the region will be facing the same issues but at a much more intense level five years from now.

While attention was largely focused on water availability and water quality, wastewater may be the more important consideration, particularly with regard to development in unincorporated areas. Water authorities and water supply corporations are required by Texas state law to provide water resources to entities who meet certain requirements. Wastewater, on the other hand, is the one area that counties do have an authority to regulate. The availability of wastewater treatment facilities, or lack of these facilities, can significantly affect the pace of development.

What is the future outlook?

The notion of building a “sustainability economy” was among the more intriguing ideas floated during the interviews. In a nutshell, purely local environmental issues are now seen increasingly through the lens of global concerns and are being elevated to a new level.

An example of this is one local company’s interest in making Central Texas a hub for solar energy in the U.S. Company representatives felt that they had the technology and visibility within the industry to help transform Central Texas from the “Silicon Hills” into the “Solar Hills.” This new focus is partly a reflection of changes in the semiconductor industry, but also aligns well with the company’s message of “making a difference” in the world.

In the immediate future, the region will see more demand for water and wastewater in unincorporated areas. There will also be more fights over water rights. Without laws that regulate water supply corporations and regional water purveyors, this issue will continue. Water (cost, quality, and availability) is the tipping point for some Central Texas businesses. From the public sector perspective, water availability is the largest concern. For the public-at-large, loss of open space and farmland to new subdivisions, roadways or commercial developments is a significant environmental concern. Preservation and promotion of agriculture products grown in Central Texas was raised in several public workshops as a potential strategy to address this issue.

Surprisingly, the subject of air quality was only raised in passing during the Vision Progress Assessment. This was despite the fact that changing air quality standards are likely to have a dramatic impact on the way business is conducted in the region.

Quality of life / Unique character

◀ **Related ECT Vision Element:** Preservation of our region’s unique character by protecting and enhancing our neighborhoods, towns, rural areas, historic sites, and special sense of place.

What has changed in the last five years?

There is no question that Central Texas's growth has had an impact on communities throughout the region. Assessing how "quality of life" has changed on a regional basis is a difficult, if not impossible task. The concept means different things to different people and perception of change is affected by a number of factors, such as where the person is in Central Texas and when they first came to the region. Because of the individualized nature of the topic, quality of life concerns were rarely discussed in depth during the business interviews. When asked directly, most demurred from discussing issues they felt they could not fully understand, or that affected them only indirectly.

The comprehensive plan

One of the most ironic findings in this study is that communities throughout the region want to control their destiny and retain their unique character. Yet, many of these communities lack a comprehensive plan or updated zoning ordinance. These are the primary tools for managing growth consistent with the community vision. A comprehensive plan is a document developed by a community based on a vision for how the community wants to grow. Zoning by Texas law must be in accordance with a comprehensive plan, or future land use plan. Additionally, local utility and transportation plans (which are often part of a comprehensive plan) can help communities develop impact fees so that new growth will pay for itself.

Who has one?

As part of the survey of planners and planning officials in the region, respondents were asked whether or not the city they represented had a comprehensive plan in place and whether or not they had any specific area plans (such as a downtown plan or redevelopment plan for a particular part of town). Of the 17 unique ZIP Codes for which a response was received, slightly more than two-thirds (70 percent) reported having a comprehensive plan in place. A similar amount (65 percent) reported having specific plans in addition to their comprehensive plan.

The underlying drivers affecting quality of life are also perceived in varied ways. Some impacts can be attributed to growth and development that changes the landscape; some to new people moving in from out of the region with different attitudes and ways of life; some to new transportation projects opening up new corridors for growth and development.

Quality of life concerns, however, were a frequent topic of public workshop participants and survey respondents. Perceptions of the nature of changes experienced in the region were mixed. While some changes were a definite source of frustration, such as the region's growing level of traffic congestion, there was general agreement that other areas have seen significant improvement. Most notably, access to and quality of healthcare has increased substantially throughout the region.

Access to educational opportunities has also increased for area residents -- the continued expansion of Austin Community College and the growing prominence of Texas State University at San Marcos are just two examples. Most citizens have expressed satisfaction with improvements to their local schools and the expansion of higher education facilities. They recognize, however, that these changes come at a price. The increasing tax burden of schools to accommodate the growth pressures has been felt in the pocket books of many in the region. Yet school officials interviewed during this project listed the many subdivisions about to be developed mostly in unincorporated areas, which will further exacerbate these pressures.

Central Texas residents also viewed changes in entertainment offerings in a positive light. Austin has become even more well-known as a music destination, with significant increases in visitors for music events such as SXSW or Austin City Limits Music Festival. While the benefit of these events has not been fully realized by communities outside Austin, the number and extent of entertainment offerings continues to expand throughout the region.

The region's changing demographics have led to many cultural debates in Central Texas. The declining share of African Americans in urban areas and the growing Hispanic population throughout the region are altering the way that communities are growing. Elected officials have listened to their growing populations' interest in developing more cultural activities. Many communities have expanded their cultural resources – from Austin's Long Center and Mexican American Cultural Center to Hays Consolidated Independent School Districts' Performing Arts Center.

Like quality of life, concerns about the loss of "a sense of place" were a common topic raised by individuals and public officials. Yet like quality of life, the task of preserving the region's "unique character" is a difficult one. Again, this is due in large part to the lack of a common definition. One community called it their "pace of getting things done" another called it their "unique style of architecture." However defined, this unique character is important to cities in the region and they are often unhappy to see it change.

What challenges or barriers remain?

Understanding the relationship between land use and a community's character or sense of place remains a barrier for some parts of the region. The majority of communities along I-35 in Central Texas have recently updated or are about to update their comprehensive plans. However, many smaller communities that are off I-35 lack the wherewithal to undertake this effort. Significant resources are necessary to help these communities develop comprehensive plans, land development ordinances, and other tools that reflect the values of local residents and the realities of the market. In the absence of such steps, the individual character of cities may change in ways unacceptable to the inhabitants.

Keeping pace with growth and building needed facilities will continue to be a challenge for many communities. Suburban communities that are experiencing significant residential growth are realizing their new residents want the same amenities as the urban areas they left. This will be a major challenge to elected officials, both to understand what these amenities are, and to finance and build them. The challenge of keeping up with facilities needs is especially pronounced for school districts and the taxpayers who support their growth.

Describe the biggest changes in your area in the last five years (positive and negative).

1. More housing (subdivisions, condos in downtown Austin)
2. More choices in restaurants, retail, entertainment
3. More jobs, industry
4. Greater understanding of value of mixed use, need for transit
5. Increased economic activity and standard of living
6. Increased traffic congestion
7. Impact of traffic on air quality
8. Increased concerns over water issues
9. Loss of natural areas, open space, farmland
10. Loss of sense of place, community, unique character
11. Infrastructure not keeping pace with development
12. Increased demands on schools, public services
13. Higher taxes
14. Housing less affordable, cost of living has increased

Summary of public workshop comments compiled by ECT staff

Expanding the benefits of quality of life improvements throughout the region will continue to be a challenge. For example, outlying communities do not benefit from SXSW or Austin City Limits festival as much as Austin or Travis County. Expanding musical venues throughout the region would help brand the region – not just Austin – as a musical mecca. Likewise healthcare improvements have not been equally distributed throughout the five-county region. While some area have seen great improvements in healthcare, many citizens still have to travel up to 40 miles to give birth at major medical care facilities. Access to healthcare plays a role in the attraction and retention of talent.

What is the future outlook?

The region's ethnic composition will continue to increase in diversity. Suburban communities are ready to embrace change and will make efforts to better understand what this change means to them, but they need help. Models for expanding arts, culture, and music throughout the region could help to sustain a strong quality of life base in the region.

People expect change in a growing region but want to manage that change on their terms. What does this mean? Among other things, it means that they want to take charge of their own future and not have it imposed on them from outside. It means that initiatives that come out of Austin may be regarded as antithetical to what citizens envision for themselves. Not all communities in Central Texas share in the "Keep Austin Weird" slogan.

What's Next?

Is the ECT Vision still valid? This question needs to be asked. While it was not addressed specifically in the interviews or the public meetings, it is fair to say that it was implicit in many of the responses. The answer to the question is a qualified yes. "Qualified" because business leaders and elected officials want to see specific actions and specific mechanisms that will help them plan for growth. This was the dominant theme of this assessment. There was little criticism of the Vision and its continuing appropriateness. There was, however, a profound concern that the institutions (including ECT) who might embrace this Vision did not have the means to address the goals. This also explains the desire for regional coordination – and the fact that there were obvious misgivings that coordination was really possible.

The sense that growth in Central Texas needs to be managed, that traffic is getting out of hand, that high Austin housing costs are forcing suburban and rural development, that the environment is being degraded (especially water), and that the unique character of communities is being compromised – these are very real concerns. While no one questioned the benefits of acting on the Vision, every interview and every focus group wondered how that action would be taken.

The way we might learn from other communities, expressed as a need for the region to "stop navel gazing," could translate into new benchmarks for Central Texas. These benchmarks could open the way to fresh discussions about practical solutions to key regional issues: how sales tax revenues might be (at least in part) shared throughout the region on specific projects; approaches to better coordination of regional transportation planning and mobility alternatives, or strategies for capitalizing on solar energy or other renewables. In short, a *refreshing of the Vision* is called for. This process should be backed by action steps, a shared sense of responsibility among regional entities, and a willingness for ECT to educate, advocate, and act.