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Planners brace for a crescendo of new jobs, housing

Study explores ways to keep pace with growth

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By 2050, the tri-county West Houston/Katy area is expected to add about 260 square miles of residential development and double in population to about 2.2 million.

To help plan for that expected explosion, the **West Houston Association** on Thursday unveiled its blueprint entailing more than two years of study, "West Houston Plan 2050: Envisioning Greater West Houston at **Mid-Century**."

Topics tackled by a panel of experts include market research, residential development, infrastructural management and trends in city growth.

Mark Kilkenny, **WHA board** chairman, said making sure new suburbs include master-planned communities, deed restrictions from homeowners associations and enhanced standards for small developments is critical.

In creating the WHA plan, "West Houston is entering a conversation on accommodating sustainable growth," said panel moderator and WHA board vice chairman **David Hightower**.

West Houston has seen an increase of 85,000 net jobs — most in business and professional services — in the the last 12 months, said panelist **Charles Savino**, executive vice president of **CDS Market Research**.

The economy is largely driven by the oil and gas industry, Savino said, and that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future with "the Energy Corridor, Westchase, Memorial Parkway and Interstate 10 all continuing to be major activity centers."

A conservative estimate, he said, is that at least 400,000 housing units and 43 million square feet of office space will be needed during the next half-century.

"To maintain growth we will have to improve the things we're doing – low cost of living, low cost of business hurdles," Savino said. "Nothing's secure, nothing's certain, (but) attractiveness factors help areas grow."

Ted Nelson, regional president of homebuilder **Newland Communities**, warned that a lack of vision, innovation and "green" building – and too much needless regulation – could create urban sprawl marked by "sameness and lack of character."

"As a cornerstone of sustainable planning, as planners, developers, builders, we need to recognize that what we build lasts a long, long time – one hundred years," Nelson said. "We can build ditches or waterways. Which would you rather live by?"

Jim Royer, executive vice president and chief operating officer of AECOM companies, said Houston has to begin now on renewable surface water sources that will sustain the pressures put on its aging infrastructure by a ballooning population. Currently, he said, "There are no significant projects in the works to supply additional surface water sources after 2030."

He predicted that water-treatment systems and projects such as toll roads will demand more public-private partnerships. Transportation routes could benefit from freeing up existing freight-rail lines for other uses, such as major thoroughfares and mass transit.

Bob Collie, a former Houston city attorney who is now with the law firm **Andrews Kurth**, said, "future decades will be filled with agreements and partnerships between government, private (entities) and specially created taxing authorities."

"I think there will be an increasing role of the private sector in transportation,

water and sewer as well," he said.

For more information about the WHA, the 2050 plan or the symposium, visit 820 Gessner, Suite 190, call [713-461-9378](tel:713-461-9378) or visit www.westhouston.org.

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