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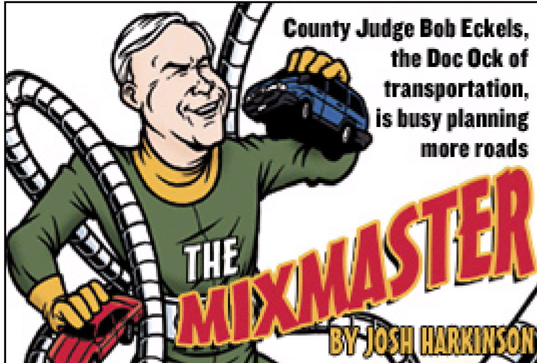
Feature

The Mixmaster

County Judge Bob Eckels, the Doc Ock of transportation, is busy planning more roads

BY JOSH HARKINSON



The three-block area along Bunningham Lane, west of Voss Road, is one of the many places in Houston where fate is obscured by yellow caution tape. A chain-link fence, a phalanx of neon traffic barrels and a "Road Closed" sign clearly proclaim this is no longer a place to go. But what they don't say is where Bunningham -- as a street, a part of a neighborhood, a place to maybe walk the dog -- is heading.

Peek through the fence, and a glade stretches down either side of the lane for hundreds of yards, with oaks and magnolias, blooming hibiscus plants and hydrangeas. The birds chirp and the saint augustine is well mowed.

Yet if this is a city park, it seems to have closed long ago. A pile of junk in the corner holds a dusty flipper, an old fishing net and a deflated volleyball. There are no water fountains or benches.

The real story of Bunningham is told on the street curb. Every few yards, it curves inward, where driveways once ran. They now end abruptly in grass or mud. And between an oak and a crape myrtle, a wooden stake marks what they will become. On it someone has written "curb of feeder Rd."

Daniel Kramer

Once lined with houses and lawns, Bunningham Lane is being razed to make way for the expanded Katy Freeway.

It was here that last month Lillian Jones's red brick home, with white trim and azaleas in the front, was bulldozed to make way for the eventual widening of the Katy Freeway. At 92, Jones had lived in the home since the Katy was a four-lane road. She was one of the last residents on the street to go.

"We had chosen that spot carefully, and they just messed it up," she says, sitting with her son Carlton, who grew up in the house. "It was nice to be near a freeway, but not part of it."

A six-mile strip along the Katy now resembles a bombed-out quarter of Sarajevo. Entire blocks have been flattened, and office buildings sit vacant, overcome by weeds. The 18-lane Katy project is already more than $1 billion over budget. And for Judge Robert Eckels, Harris County commissioner, chair of the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Transportation Policy Council and self-appointed road czar, it's just the beginning.

"A lot of [my opponents] believe we cannot reduce congestion," Eckels says. "Those folks are just flat wrong."

Last month, Eckels's policy council pushed through the $77 billion 2025 Regional Transportation Plan, a 20-year road map for the eight-county region's mobility needs. It promotes the biggest road-

building bonanza the Houston area has ever seen. The plan equates to 117 Katy Freeway projects, or enough lane miles to stretch from San Francisco to South Africa.

David Kramer
Houston-Galveston Area Council director Alan Clark (left) and Harris County Judge Robert Eckels are the drivers behind a transportation plan focused on roads.

If built, the plan will make present-day Los Angeles look like a cluster of bus terminals. And it may well boost air pollution and make the suburbs even bigger. But what most enrages a growing chorus of critics is more basic: The plan's roads ultimately won't banish traffic jams, and will probably make them worse.

Everybody knows Houston is a freeway city. During much of the early 1990s, the Houston region alone built more roads than any other state except California and Texas. Yet a lot of people now say that's changing. The rail lines are going in. Young people are moving into new, dense apartment buildings in Montrose, the Heights and Midtown. Downtown is finally a hip place to buy an Eames lamp and a bellini.

Even so, our mobility planners aren't impressed.

Their transportation plan estimates where people in Houston will move over the next 20 years. And they're not moving downtown. In fact, they're not moving anywhere close. Of the three million people who will settle in the Houston region by 2025, the planners say, most will stake claims past Loop 610 and out of town.

Most of us won't have much time for barhopping, it seems, because we'll be driving. We already drive 39 miles a day -- more than the residents of any other urbanized area in the nation. And we should get ready to drive more, the planners say. As workers move farther out, most jobs will remain closer in. Car miles traveled in the region will spike 75 percent.

To save the Houston region from plunging into gridlock, the plan prescribes bigger roads, faster roads and more roads -- way more roads than in comparable regions elsewhere. The Atlanta area's 2025 RTP, which doesn't include airports and ports, slates 46 percent of transportation funding for roads. By contrast, excluding ports and airports from the Houston plan, roads receive, percentage-wise, half again as many dollars -- a whopping 72 percent of all transportation money.

"[T]here's places to go, and that's what's lost on a whole lot of folks," Eckels says. "When I want to come down to a baseball game or a football game or bring 100,000 people downtown for a festival or a Super Bowl, you've got to have roads to get down there."

And if anybody has the power to build more of them, it's Eckels.

Reaching into Texas's intricate network of road interests, Eckels chairs the Interstate Highway 69 Coalition-Texas, a group pushing for an interstate from Mexico to Canada. Dubbed the NAFTA freeway, the trade route is slated to run near Houston. As the group's chairman, Eckels also spoke out recently in favor of the Trans Texas Corridor, a 4,000-mile superartery proposed by Governor Rick Perry that would crisscross the state with six passenger lanes, four truck lanes and several rail lines. Eckels said I-69 could follow part of the route.

Eckels also dabbles in rail transit, but with a freeway angle. He chairs the Texas High Speed Rail and Transportation Corporation, which wants to build along the Trans Texas Corridor and may help the massive project gain more political steam.

On the local scene, Eckels oversees the Harris County Toll Road Authority, which is quickly becoming the arbiter of the region's freeway future. Last year, the agency single-handedly revived hopes of completing the Grand Parkway, the 170-mile exurban megaloop long thought too expensive and environmentally destructive to consider. Eckels helped break the funding logjam when he expressed a willingness to build the loop with toll money. It is now listed as a potential toll road in the transportation plan.

Thanks in part to Eckels, some of the Grand Parkway segments have found their way into the plan under a surprisingly brisk construction schedule. For example, work on a $37 million, seven-mile segment of the parkway from U.S. 59 to the Harris County line is proposed to begin in 2006. Not a single public meeting has been held on the project.

The Grand Parkway looks even more inevitable in the plan when one eyes the 73 projects slated to connect with the proposed freeway. "Why do they need 73 projects to widen and extend roads that go to a highway that hasn't been built unless their intention is to build it?" asks Christine Sagstetter, regional representative for the Sierra Club. "I mean, that is a no-brainer."

And the impact of the Toll Road Authority goes way beyond the Grand Parkway. The $2.8 billion in toll roads scheduled to be built in the plan comprise the overwhelming majority of all new freeways slated for the region. They include:

* A $118.6 million extension of the Hardy Toll Road from Loop 610 to Interstate 10 near downtown, to be built in 2006

* The $89 million Bayport Toll Road, to be built between Beltway 8 and SH 146 in 2009

* The $330 million, 20-mile Northwest Corridor Tollway, to be built between the Grand Parkway and the West Loop in 2013

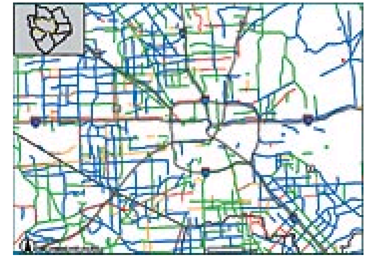
* A $98 million extension of the Fort Bend Parkway toll road in two directions, beginning in 2010 and 2015

Downtown boosters say these projects will push more people to the suburbs. But Eckels says it's the opposite: Without roads to bring commuters downtown, jobs will leave the business center and downtown will wither. "If you cut off the growth and the capacity of the commuter to come into downtown," he says, "you do wind up seeing that downward spiral again, because people will leave."

And the region needs to build these freeways soon, he adds, or it will find itself trapped in another Katy Freeway scenario -- condemning expensive land to play a game of catch-up. But of course, tapping the outer regions of the suburbs will also require new road development closer to downtown, as new freeways disgorge their commuters onto city streets. The Toll Road Authority mostly can't help here, but Eckels can.

In 2000, Eckels began working with the Greater Houston Partnership, former mayor Bob Lanier, U.S. Representative Tom DeLay, anti-rail advocate Michael Stevens and other officials and businessmen on a mobility plan called Trip 2000. The group asked Eckels to get the Houston-Galveston Area Council to come up with a hypothetical remedy to 100 percent of the region's traffic congestion problems. "Eckels agreed," wrote Partnership COO Charlie Savino in an e-mail last year, "and asked Alan Clark [director] of H-GAC to prepare a plan that would bring the community to a specified level of mobility…"

The document H-GAC produced last year became known as the 100 Percent Plan. It devoted one page to public transportation projects and 11 pages to roads. At the time, Clark reportedly called the projects theoretical. But some were more theoretical than others. The 2025 plan incorporated one 20-mile commuter rail line from the study, valued at $667 million. And it incorporated thousands of miles of roads. The price tag for these roads totals $9 billion -- roughly twice the cost of the entire METRORail project.



As this H-GAC map shows, the Houston area is a veritable spider's web of road projects.

True, federal money is scarce for public transit. But roads aren't free either, especially when they don't qualify as interstates or state farm roads. Even so, that hasn't stopped Eckels from adopting Smart Streets, a road-based solution to neighborhood-to-neighborhood traffic congestion. "Smart Streets are not freeways and not major thoroughfares but something in between," says Partnership member James Royer, who helped the Trip 2000 group promote the idea. "Picture Allen Parkway." The streets will include limited access points and high-tech sensors to adjust signals with traffic flow. Initially, the Smart Streets projects also included converting thoroughfares such as Gessner, Westheimer and FM 1960 into grade-separated avenues with overpasses and underpasses, just like freeways. The 2025 planners scrapped those specific proposals based on outcry at recent public meetings yet kept the hypothetical funding for them in the plan, in the event neighborhoods decide to support them.

Beyond advocating for these projects, Eckels and his friends are aggressively looking for ways to pay for them. The judge chairs the Texas Urban Transportation Alliance, a lobbying group that wants the state legislature to allow cities and counties to impose their own gas taxes and use them for road improvements. "It is going to take a very coordinated effort with people of great vision and political skill, like Judge Eckels, like Mayor White," Royer said, "to see if we can work out a government strategy to allow us to do this."

But as more money and political energy are expended on building roadways, skeptics say, the impacts on the region's quality of life go unanswered. Catherine Pernot, an associate with the Gulf Coast Institute, a regional think tank, says that's scary. "I think that's a huge gamble," she says, "because we don't know what this plan is. There are so many unanswered questions in terms of what effects all these roads will have on neighborhoods, flooding, tax bases, air quality, and whether or not you will be able to cross the street. Just basic stuff."

On the sidewalk along a swishing access road, below a billboard for strawberry milk, Winifred Hamilton has made up her mind to sprint. Flower-patterned dress and pearl earrings in wild flutter, the 56-year-old scientist crosses three lanes, just ahead of a charging Ford Expedition. She wades past the median's crabgrass, Styrofoam cup and Kit Kat wrapper to where few people willingly travel at 5:15 p.m.: the eastbound Katy Freeway just west of Interstate 45.

From the right-hand lane, a man in a do-rag gives her an overly friendly wave. But what most concerns Hamilton is out of sight. She is the director of the Environmental Health Section of Baylor College of Medicine's Chronic Disease Prevention and Control Research Center. And she knows this median is a bad place to linger.

"We are breathing all sorts of particulate matter," she says, "some of which goes into the deepest recesses of your lungs. We are breathing toxic, carcinogenic chemicals. We are breathing carbon

monoxide and several other combustion gases. We're also breathing probably a little bit of asbestos, a little bit of lead that's still on the ground and is being kept airborne."

Environmental laws have limited some of these pollutants, but not all of them. In fact, given the transportation future envisioned in the plan, health problems from car engine pollution in Houston will probably get worse, says Hamilton, who holds a master's degree in environmental health epidemiology from Harvard. She has agreed to come to the freeway to explain some of the problems.

"We can't go on like this forever and still have a livable city," she yells, as eight lanes creep by with idling Buicks, Freightliners and Muranos.

David Kramer
Baylor environmental scientists Winifred Hamilton (left) and Rebecca Jensen say that living next to roads like the Katy Freeway can cause serious health problems.

The implications of building more roads, and putting more cars on existing ones, are especially troubling given recent studies showing how dangerous it is to live near them. For example, a 2002 study conducted in the Netherlands found that adults who lived 110 yards from a freeway or 55 yards from a major road were nearly two times more likely to die of heart and lung disease. In Massachusetts, people who lived near major roads were found to be at higher risk from chronic wheezing. And a 2003 Los Angeles study found that mothers who lived near high-traffic roadways were 10 to 20 percent more likely to give birth to a premature or low-weight baby, both of which put the child at risk for health problems.

Young children can suffer dramatically from freeways. Numerous studies link proximity to busy roads with childhood asthma. A 2002 study by the New York State Department of Health found that children who lived within 218 yards of a high-traffic roadway were nearly two times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than similar children who lived farther away. Roads can particularly threaten children in zoning-free Houston. For example, five schools fall within 200 yards of the expanded Katy Freeway, and one day-care center will directly border the new access road.

"If you live or go to work or school within that buffer zone," Hamilton says, "you are going to be exposed to significantly more pollution."

Of course, the most road pollution lingers where many of us spend a big chunk of our time: smack in the middle of the freeways. Driving in a car exposes passengers to two to four times as much pollution as standing on the side of the road -- even with the air conditioner on recycle and the windows up. In fact, a recent Los Angeles study found that many workers received their biggest daily dose of carcinogens -- between 15 and 60 percent -- while commuting 1.5 hours to work in their cars.

Environmental concerns will ultimately limit the Houston region's transportation plan. In the coming months, the federal government will review the plan for compliance with air quality rules. Eckels is confident it will pass muster. The plan anticipates new fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles will cut down on emissions, even as the region adds more cars to the road.

Hamilton is skeptical. "All the studies have shown that the increasing number of vehicles, the increasing number of miles driven per day, overwhelm any of these improvements we have made in making cleaner cars," she says, "and we have made some real improvements."

Breathing pollution isn't the only unhealthy part of commuting. A Yale University study published last month linked driving to the growing obesity epidemic. The study found for every extra 30 minutes

metro Atlanta commuters drove each day, they had a 3 percent greater chance of being obese than their peers who drove less.

And obviously, the greatest health threat from commuting is the tendency of drivers to crash. Compared to other major cities, Houston leads the nation in auto injuries per mile, reports the H-GAC. Nearly 600 people die each year on the region's roadways, and some 90,000 are injured.

But look ahead 20 years into a freeway future, and a whole new set of problems may emerge. For example, consider paying much more for gas. After years of shrugging off spurious oil crisis predictions, Wilbur Gay, a retired vice president of planning and economics for Pennzoil, says he sees increasing evidence that the world oil supply will peak by 2010. He's been clamoring for the ear of the city's transportation planners. "We have not found enough oil to replace production in any year since 1989," he says. "The reason I want to talk to Judge Eckels is [to ask] why do they want to spend $70 billion on this huge transportation system when there will be fewer cars?"

Building a meganetwork of highways and roads also will require us to shell out more money down the line to repave and fill potholes. The expense will be gigantic, and increased by billions since H-GAC's previous transportation plan, Pernot estimates. Clark says the adjustment was largely due to an unanticipated lack of road maintenance in Houston over the past three years.

"We have been caught with our pants down in terms of taking care of roads," Pernot says, "and here they are talking about expanding roadways by 55 to 60 percent. I am not sure that is the most logical conclusion."

But despite the cost, the health problems and the time spent on the road, maybe the decision to drive makes sense. After all, Houstonians love throwing footballs in their big backyards, splashing in their swimming pools and grilling dinner amid the privacy of tall wooden fences -- and cars help make it happen. Yet even if the $24 billion in new road capacity in the plan prolongs this existence, it won't do it for long.

A few blocks away from the snarled interchange of U.S. 59 and Loop 610, on a bookshelf in Pernot's Gulf Coast Institute office, sits a photo of the nearby mixmaster taken a few years ago. Shot from a plane, it shows everything going fine: The on-ramps gracefully crisscross and a handful of cars cruise through them with ease. It looks like a scene any city would be proud of, and maybe that's why it's sold by the visitors' bureau as a postcard -- proclaiming across the top in bright red: "Houston."

Of course, anybody who visits Houston during rush hour these days is less likely to notice the mixmaster's elegant engineering than its preponderance of exhaust and brake lights. Houston, one of the last cities in America to question freeway construction, is now one of the most traffic-snarled. "In all of the evidence of the past decade, you've seen that we keep building more roads," Pernot says, "and congestion gets worse and worse."

This paradox can't be explained away by population growth alone. Between 1982 and 2001, the number of miles Houstonians drove every day on freeways and major roads increased more than twice as fast as the number of people living here. Nor would the problem likely go away if we built even more roads, research suggests. A University of California at Berkeley study covering 30 California counties between 1973 and 1990 found that for every 10 percent increase in roadway capacity, traffic increased 9 percent within four years.

Traffic engineers have an explanation for this phenomenon. They call it induced traffic. "Trying to cure traffic congestion by building roads is like trying to cure obesity by loosening your belt," goes a commonly cited explanation of the theory. Widening roads allows the city's girth to expand outward by shortening commutes, but as more people relocate to the suburbs, the roads fill up, ultimately making the trek into the city more burdensome for everybody.

"The question is not how many lanes must be built to ease congestion," writes Andres Duany, author of *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, "but how many lanes of congestion would you want? Do you favor four lanes of bumper to bumper traffic at rush hour, or sixteen?"

Houston-area traffic planners recognize this issue, to a degree, and their plan includes some ways to address it without pouring much cement. Besides the proposed use of Smart Streets, there's a plan to convert U.S. 290 into a toll road to encourage off-peak commuting by charging people more to drive during rush hour.

But Duany, who teaches planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, calls these ideas equally misguided:

"If, as is now clear beyond a reasonable doubt, people maintain an equilibrium of just-bearable traffic, then these traffic engineers are wasting their time -- and our money -- on a whole new set of stopgap measures that produce temporary results at best…While certainly less wasteful than new construction, these measures also do nothing to address the real cause of traffic congestion, which is that people choose to put up with it."

And in Houston, driving is often less of a choice than a necessity. A chart in the transportation plan shows the city has a lower transportation choice ratio than any other major U.S. urban area besides Detroit. That's why Pernot wants the transportation plan to include more options for people to walk, bike and ride public transit. Over the next 20 years, the vast majority of the region's new residents will be poor immigrants from Latin America -- people who come from densely populated cities and who probably won't be able to afford cars.

Josh Harkinson

Catherine Pernot, an associate with the Gulf Coast Institute, says that transportation money would be better spent on pedestrian-friendly projects such as sidewalks.

But Pernot says the region also needs transportation options if it wants to attract more people like herself. Wearing a black cowl-neck sweater and black rectangular frames, the 28-year-old doesn't try to hide the fact that, until recently, she worked as a financial analyst at Enron. After the company collapsed, she thought about following many fellow yuppies to the parks, trains and nightlife of Boston and New York. Yet she was more sentimental about her adopted city. She wrote an op-ed piece in the *Houston Chronicle* titled "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" arguing that more young grads would stay in Houston if the city offered a better quality of life.

And that means using the urban landscape efficiently. Convert the condemned neighborhood along Bunningham into a park, for example, and the city would still have enough space to address Katy Freeway traffic with a rail or bus line.

Of course, the transportation planners still seem to think the region's biggest allure is the chance to own a suburban acre, a garage and a tennis court. Stephen L. Klineberg, a professor of sociology at Rice University, says that assumption held true for 60 years, but suddenly doesn't. "This year, between 2003 and 2004, a kind of paradigm shift seems to have occurred in the psyches of

suburbanites," he says. "Where today, as many people in the suburbs say they would be interested in moving to the city as vice versa. So there is a real shift there, there's new interest in living downtown and living in the city."

Eckels obviously hasn't paid much heed to Klineberg, but some of Houston's biggest erstwhile freeway boosters have. Sitting in front of an antique desk in his River Oaks mansion, sipping on a cup of coffee served from a tray, former mayor Bob Lanier explains why he thinks building more roads would be impractical:

"The objective we have in substantial part rests on the theory that we need to build capacity to take everybody where they want to go, when they want to go there, one person per car," he says. "And we shouldn't build that much, and I don't think we need to, and whether we need to or not, I don't think we can. We won't get the money, I don't think we'll pass the environmental tests, and the right-of-way costs too much."

Daniel Kramer
Former mayor Bob Lanier says the boom days of freeway building are over.

Lanier now agrees with the mounting ranks of environmentalists, financial analysts and transportation experts that a much better way to solve our transportation problems would be to encourage more people to live closer to downtown.

"Now people are starting to come move back inside 610," he says, "and as they do, that takes passenger miles off the highway at a rate almost nothing else will do."

Next to a towering parking garage, in an office building just a bit taller, a public meeting is under way to discuss the transportation plan. Marcy Perry, a member of the Citizens Transportation Coalition, is suspicious that it's a sham. "[Most] of these meetings were held before the project list was even published," she says, addressing Eckels and his council members. "It leads me to believe that public comment is neither wanted nor accepted."

Seven other speakers follow, and none of them is there to ask the members of the Transportation Policy Council for more roads. They want bike paths, commuter rail, sidewalks and buses. They want a new study on what would make sense if more people moved inside the Loop. But it's not clear they're being heard.

Throughout the statements, Eckels mostly looks down at his desk. The first response from a council member comes from James Patterson, a Fort Bend County representative, who wants to know if public speakers at the next meeting can each be limited to just a few minutes. None of the speakers has rambled, but the board also talks about getting a device that flashes lights at them, in case they do. And Eckels proposes limiting public comments at the next meeting to no more than a half-hour.

Clearly, this agency lacks a history of dealing with public input. Pernot found H-GAC even more unprepared when she audited an outreach meeting on the plan last year. Officials were required to forward comments to the policy council members, yet none of roughly ten oral statements, many of them from poor Hispanics who couldn't drive, were reported. Another 17 comments submitted in writing were summarized "in a way that was completely erroneous," she says. The planners totally omitted the most common statement: that people felt the public-comment process itself was an exercise in futility.

After Pernot complained, H-GAC implemented changes. Now a court reporter records the comments. And following more complaints, the council increased the number of public meetings, though regions such as Atlanta offer more once their transportation plans are released.

Despite holding few meetings, Eckels says he's trying to boost public input. His office put out 60,000 notices for one meeting, he says, but only 50 people showed up. He doubts comments from those people represent a majority viewpoint. "I think they represent a view of a group of people," he says. "I think most people in Houston want to see congestion reduced. And we are going to work towards reducing congestion."

But reducing it with roads probably isn't the most popular option. Last year, a poll of Harris County residents conducted by Klineberg found that only 27 percent of them preferred roads as the best long-term solution to traffic. A full 70 percent supported building public transit or living in communities closer to work.

Eckels's strategy to reduce congestion aligns more tightly with the work done by many of his campaign contributors. Since 2000, he has accepted $93,250 in campaign contributions from road builders and suburban developers. Major contributors include people such as Michael Stevens, who led the fight against the METRORail project; roadway contractor Charles Beyer; and Bob Perry, owner of Perry Homes, which has built only nine of its 48 projects inside the Loop.

Eckels denies the donations have influenced him. He says many contractors would also eagerly build rail projects, and many developers would be happy to see them whistle through their communities.

Klineberg disagrees. "To build a different kind of Houston requires a different set of talent and experience," he says. "And it can be developed, but people who have the personnel already trained to build roads are going to be very much inclined to want to keep doing that."

In the end, the transportation plan is a political give-and-take between people such as Eckels, who represent suburban interests, and representatives from the city of Houston, who should be opposing projects that sap vitality from the city core. And one of the biggest outrages of the entire process, activists say, is that Houston's members of the planning committee have done almost nothing to advocate for the city's interests. In fact, they haven't even gone to most of the meetings. At more than half of the 26 meetings leading up to the vote on the plan, only one of Houston's three delegates was present. City Councilmember Carol Alvarado and her alternate attended only six meetings, and City Councilmember Gabriel Vasquez made it to just four. Both were replaced on the board in April, three meetings before the plan passed.

So how do Houston residents influence Eckels?

"I appreciate the comments of those folks," he says, "and I may or may not agree with them. But when it's over, we have our vote, and if they want to change it three years down the line, elect a new county judge. Because that's where the ultimate accountability is in this."

Before Lillian Jones was forced to leave her house on Bunningham to make way for the Katy Freeway, she sold her homegrown flowers. "They went like hotcakes," she says. Some people even bought the ones in the ground. She couldn't take them with her because she was too old to replant her life all over again. Instead, she moved to a retirement community, a place with a big parking lot and a small courtyard where not much is in bloom this time of year.

But on a recent Saturday afternoon when her son was visiting, Jones was making do. The flowers were on her bright blue and pink dress, sharing the fabric with butterflies. She sat in an armchair and, around her, oil paintings and a medieval tapestry hung close together on apartment walls.

Josh Harkinson
Now 92, Lillian Jones was born when most people still walked to get around.

Despite her best efforts, starting a new life has been tough. "It's really hard to adjust when you don't have space," she says. "Even the kitty has problems."

George the cat got lost one day in the complex, where one place looks just like another. A resident found him and sent him to the pound. Jones had to pay to get him back, and she knows how he must have felt.

"Sometimes I think it's pretty soon time to go home," she says. "Then I realize, 'Home, I don't have a home.' "

Her new apartment sits a few miles north of the Katy Freeway, but it's not immune to the influence of Eckels's transportation plan. A block away runs Gessner -- potentially, a future Smart Street.

Asked to weigh in on her city's transportation future, Jones, who was born when most people still walked to get around, tries not to let nostalgia get the best of her. "I don't have enough information about what is best," she says. "I just know this is a big mess."