



more choices,
great places



LIVABLE CENTERS



What is a

Livable Center?

Compact and Mixed Use



Designed to be Walkable



Connected and Accessible



H-GAC is the voluntary association of local governments in the 13-county Gulf Coast Planning region of Texas. H-GAC also serves as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the eight-county Houston-Galveston area. As the MPO, H-GAC is responsible for developing and maintaining the long-range Regional Transportation Plan (RTP).

A New Growth Strategy

By 2035, the eight-county Houston-Galveston region is expected to grow by an additional 3.5 million people. Accommodating this growth will overburden the region's transportation network unless we identify ways to reduce vehicle trips.

H-GAC's 2035 Regional Transportation Plan lays out a new strategy to address this growth - Livable Centers. These places are safe, convenient, and attractive areas where people can live, work, and play with less reliance on their cars. This guide is a resource to help local governments understand and implement the essential components of Livable Centers.

Elements of Livable Centers may be found, or be appropriate, in the following areas:

High-Density Areas



A concentrated mix of uses and a traditional street grid system, such as downtown areas.

Transit-Oriented Development



A high-density blend of uses within walking distance of, and with good access to, a transit facility.

What are the **Benefits?**

Community

Livable Centers are comfortable, appealing places for people to interact. They feature open spaces, such as parks, plazas, and marketplaces that accommodate public gatherings and foster a sense of community.

Mobility

Livable Centers make walking, bicycling, and transit more convenient by concentrating many destinations. Fewer local trips help to reduce congestion on major thoroughfares.

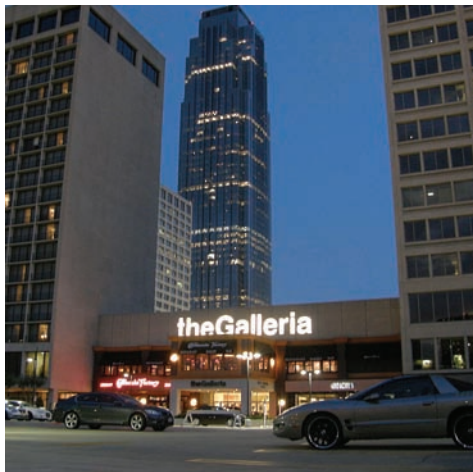
Environment

Livable Centers help preserve the environment by requiring less land for surface parking than scattered strip development. This reduces the amount of impervious surface in the region's watersheds. By reducing the need to make vehicle trips Livable Centers also help to improve air quality.

Economic Development

Livable Centers create a unique, identifiable destination, bolstering civic pride and acting as a catalyst for investment and development. Public investments can help to leverage private investment.

Regional Centers



Areas of concentrated employment and other major trip generators.

Town Centers



A combination of housing, retail, office, and civic destinations within walking distance of a community gathering place.

Special Trip Generators



Unique destinations, such as universities or sporting facilities, that place special demands upon the transportation system.

Smart Streets



Corridors that increase multi-modal accessibility and connectivity to major centers or transit facilities.

Compact and Mixed Use



Checklist for Policies and Standards

Livable Centers should:

- Encourage mixed but complementary uses (e.g. retail and office on bottom floors, residential on upper floors).
- Promote physical integration of development, either vertically (i.e. uses are layered on top of one another) or horizontally (i.e. mix of uses in close proximity to one another).
- Achieve appropriate levels of density, depending on the size and context of the Livable Center. Check out H-GAC's website to use the interactive density and benefits tool: www.h-gac.com/livablecenters
- Allow people to move between destinations without having to use vehicles.
- Provide multi-modal transportation options, including walking, biking, and mass transit.
- Provide adequate parking in convenient locations without creating an oversupply.
- Promote activity at different times of the day and week, creating balanced transit ridership and allowing for shared parking.

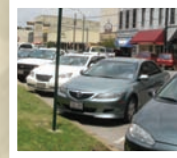
Livable Centers concentrate housing, employment, shopping, and entertainment in areas with good pedestrian networks that are easily served by transit. Clustering many different land uses in a compact area gives people the opportunity to accomplish various activities without using a car.

Livable Centers also function as one-stop destinations for drivers. Careful design and planning of parking structures or lots can minimize their impact on the visual and pedestrian environments while maximizing their convenience and accessibility. Parking policy options include utilizing:

Maximum rather than minimum **parking requirements**.



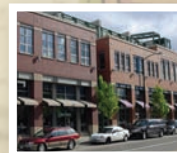
Shared parking, especially in mixed-use developments.



Parking structures with street-level retail and services.



On-street parking that counts toward parking requirements.



Designed to be Walkable

Livable Centers provide safe, convenient, and engaging experiences for pedestrians. A quality pedestrian environment has appropriately oriented and scaled buildings, good separation of persons on foot from vehicle circulation and parking, design elements that create a sense of identity, and places to interact with others such as plazas and parks.

Building Zone 0 to 5 Feet

Includes building amenities such as outdoor dining, merchandise display, or awnings.

Pedestrian Zone Minimum 5 Feet

Clear and unobstructed for pedestrian movement.

Curb Zone 5 to 10 Feet

Includes utilities, street trees, furnishings, lighting, and benches.



Checklist for Policies and Standards

Livable Centers should:

- Promote appropriate street widths (24-36 feet) that help to slow down traffic and encourage pedestrian activity.
- Meet minimum sidewalk standards, allowing for streetscape amenities such as benches, shade trees, and/or pedestrian lighting that illuminates the sidewalk versus the street.
- Remove vehicle parking as an element that separates pedestrians from buildings by emphasizing rear parking areas, parking garages, and curb parking.
- Have primary streets with lanes for vehicle circulation, but also with dedicated spaces and clear paths for transit vehicles, cyclists, and individuals crossing such streets on foot.
- Minimize building setbacks, with buildings placed near the street and with main entrances facing the sidewalk.
- Limit blank walls at the pedestrian level, through building design and articulation standards, to maintain activity along the street.
- Provide public spaces that are visible, safe, comfortable, interesting, and accessible to all.

Connected and Accessible



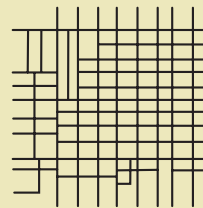
Checklist for Policies and Standards

Livable Centers should:

- Make circulation of private automobiles secondary to other travel modes once within the Center.
- Establish pedestrian-friendly speed limits, generally 20 m.p.h. or less.
- Contain short blocks of 300-400 feet or mid-block street crossings and pathways between buildings on longer blocks.
- Accommodate bicycle traffic with clearly delineated, barrier-free bicycle lanes.
- Minimize dead-end streets and promote direct pedestrian access with extensive sidewalks and trails.
- Use access management techniques (e.g. medians, consolidated driveways) to increase safety and make the street more accessible for multiple transportation modes.
- Offer rear access for service trucks in alleyways, removing blockages from the street.

Livable Centers make it easy to reach multiple destinations within the Center and in surrounding developments by foot, bicycle, car, or transit. A well-designed street and sidewalk network provides good connectivity and increases safety for all users.

Good Connectivity



A traditional street grid provides multiple, direct routes, reducing congestion and encouraging pedestrian access.

Poor Connectivity



An indirect or disjointed street network relies on a few streets to accommodate traffic, limiting pedestrian access and increasing response time for emergency vehicles.

Road networks that are connected and accessible for all users may contain the following elements:

Mass Transit

Reduces the need for parking and directly connects one Livable Center with another.

Bicycle Lanes

Provide a safe and comfortable space for bicyclists to ride, reducing conflict between vehicles and bicyclists.

Street Trees

Provide shade, visual enhancement, and also tend to reduce vehicle speeds by creating a sense of enclosure.



Implementation Strategies



Understanding the essential components and benefits of Livable Centers is the first step in making these special places a reality. Additional measures will help ensure their successful implementation.

Action Steps

- Review existing plans and ordinances (e.g. zoning and development standards, street and parking criteria, subdivision regulations) to ensure that the design elements of Livable Centers are not discouraged or prohibited by current requirements.
- Establish design guidelines or ordinances appropriate for Livable Centers, including financial and development incentives.
- Coordinate infrastructure, streetscape, and transit service improvements by bringing all stakeholders together such as engineers, emergency personnel, transportation and transit officials, developers, and local officials and residents.
- Visit the H-GAC website for additional information about elements of Livable Centers and H-GAC's Livable Centers Program: www.h-gac.com/livablecenters



CE0911

Contact Information:

www.h-gac.com/livablecenters
(713) 627-3200

The preparation of this document has been financed in part through grant[s] from the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, under the Metropolitan Planning Program, Section 104(f) of Title 23, U.S. Code. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Photograph Credits: Westchase District (pg. 2, back cover, artist rendering), Uptown Houston District (pg. 2, skyline), Rice University (pg. 3, bicycle rider), Greater East End District (pg. 7, sidewalk construction)



LIVABLE CENTERS