

# Third Loop's the charm?

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With Houston's third loop, the Grand Parkway, expected to become a reality in 2016 and a boon to the job market soon afterward, it's easy to wonder just how far from the heart of the city is too far to be a viable urban alternative.

Well, it wasn't that long ago concerns along those lines were voiced over another major roadway project.

"I remember when they were wearing snake boots to do surveys of where the toll booths would go," said Janet Wagner, president of the Harris County Historical Commission, referring to southern sections of Beltway 8 in the mid-1990s. "That was all vacant or farmland then."

While that region on either side of state Highway 288 may have been among the least developed along the Beltway's route, it was not alone in gaining both population and new businesses. And, according to statistics from the Houston-Galveston Area Council, it's still growing.

Within two miles of either side of the entirety of Beltway 8, the population was 646,130 in 1990, about the time the final segment opened. It now stands at 952,634, but is expected to increase to 1,175,262 in 2025 and 1,322,042 in 2035.

The H-GAC data also shows the number of people working in the same proximity has grown from 217,218 in 1990 to a current level of 482,831. It is expected to reach 587,911 in 2025 and 676,576 in 2035.

That would be a projected increase of about 40 percent in both population and employment over the next 25 years.

## Growth inevitable

"It's a really large area, so it's difficult to say how much this (growth) can be attributed directly to it (the roadways)," said Chris Van Slyke, a traffic program manager at H-GAC.

In many ways, the growth was inevitable and to large extent had already occurred by the time Beltway 8 was conceived, let alone became a functioning roadway, according to Billy Burge, president of the Grand Parkway Association Board.

"I can remember years of delay to building the first one, and how Bellaire didn't want it," he said, referring to Houston's original loop – Interstate 610. "That came well after everyone was all clustered up."

Burge said the Grand Parkway, hopefully, will allow for a more orderly distribution of growth ahead of major population increases that are forecast.

"It's not so much a shift (in population) as it is getting ahead of growth this time, so people can do things like drive straight to the airport," he said. "It's a more orderly way of life with less congestion."

As the outer loop, The Grand Parkway, obviously, will be bigger than the Beltway 8 – 177 miles vs. 88 miles in length. And, where the latter lies entirely in Harris County, the new roadway will also pass through Fort Bend, Montgomery, Chambers, Galveston and Brazoria counties.

H-GAC statistics show that within 2.5 miles of the Grand Parkway the population grew from 192,666 in 1990 to its current 455,116, and is expected reach 736,651 in 2025 and 972,473 in 2035. Jobs along the route – 50,184 in 1990 – doubled to 110,942 currently, and should climb to 164,041 in 2025 and 211,075 in 2035.

## 'Unique and pretty'

Those increases of 114 percent in population and 91 percent in jobs are considerably larger than expected for the Beltway 8 corridor area between now and 2035.

Realtor Pattie Huey, who keeps close tabs on regional growth as HAR liaison to the Houston Builders Association, thinks she knows part of the reason.

"If you look at that land, it's just waiting. People have been buying it up for years," she said, specifically of areas to the north of Houston. "The population is always drawn to unique and pretty."

She said increased access and better direct traffic routes will make the commutes much more manageable for many who will be working in Houston, but wouldn't have considered living so far out with only the current roads to depend on.

"It's not like we haven't been living in outlying areas for very long time," she said. "Do we refer to Cinco Ranch as being too far out now? I can

remember when Memorial was too far out."

Huey said she anticipates increased development around The Woodlands and predicted Magnolia's population will grow considerably.

Well, if north of the Grand Parkway isn't too far to be part of metropolitan area, what is? Could a fourth belt be in Houston's future?

"From a loop standpoint, this is probably the last loop, and it is truly needed," Burge said, adding that another loop would be built outside regional transportation authority, anyway.

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