

March 19, 2007, 12:29AM

## Mayor White wants brakes on gridlock

By ROD SALLEE

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*Bill White ran for mayor in 2003 on a platform that listed 43 ways to "Get Houston Moving." Halfway through his second 2-year term, White talked Tuesday with Houston Chronicle reporter Rod Sallee about Houston's mobility challenges.*

He began by responding to published complaints by two local judges in last Monday's Chronicle *about traffic jams near the courthouse complex.*

**White:** Those were some excellent suggestions from the judges. We need to respect the time of our citizens. If you're doing jury duty, you don't need to spend time in a traffic jam, too.

**Q:** One problem, they said, was freight trains on the tracks that cross San Jacinto Street. Does the city have authority to say when a train may block a street?

**A:** When we got here, the police would write a ticket and the railroad would just ignore it. They would say we were pre-empted by federal law (regulating interstate commerce), so I made two trips to Washington to deal with the head of the Surface Transportation Board (Roger Nober at the time).

Union Pacific signed an agreement and they've made changes. Our working relations now are pretty good.

**Q:** On the overall mobility front, Mayor Bob Lanier's legacy is building HOV lanes, and before that, as state Transportation Commissioner, he built freeways. You've focused mostly on making what's already here work better.

**A:** Traffic congestion doesn't need to be a way of life. If you deal with the root causes — something interfering with the flow of traffic on one hand, and too many people trying to get from the same place at the same time on the other — you can really make a difference.

**Q:** Where did you get your ideas?

**A:** For about 12 months in 2002, I immersed myself in understanding mobility issues — reading books, talking to experts. I was trying to learn whether we could continue to grow without gridlock, but also without destroying every neighborhood by widening every major thoroughfare and freeway.

And it's not original. The Texas Transportation Institute and the Houston-Galveston Area Council have been working on these things for years. Some of the basic concepts were outlined in the TRIP 2000 report by the Greater Houston Partnership, and Mayor Lanier had more impact on that than anyone else.

**Q:** TRIP stood for Travel Rate Improvement Program and it came out in 2000. What did it say?

**A:** It said we cannot deal with traffic in the same way as our city goes from 4 million to 8 million, as we did when it went from zero to 4 million. As we become more dense, we run

out of space to build our way out, so we need to give more attention to traffic management on the existing infrastructure, plus flexible working hours and creating opportunities for people to live closer to where they work.

**Q:** What was your first mobility initiative?

**A:** We started retiming the north-south streets in Midtown in January right after I took office. By the end of 2005 we had retimed over 2,000 of 2,400 intersections. Now we're going back and doing it again.

**Q:** I still get a good many complaints about stoplight timing.

**A:** We want to know about complaints. I have one myself. I support the Main Street rail line but it's wreaked havoc on some of our signal timing. Also, when there's construction or a change in traffic flow, we need to make sure we go back and retime the signals.

But for every complaint I get that a signal needs to be changed, I get two about how people notice the improvement.

**Q:** Next to the red light cameras, your best-known mobility project has to be Safe Clear, the compulsory freeway towing program initiated in 2005.

**A:** That was about removing impediments on 200 miles of freeway. The numbers (an 18 percent decrease in freeway crashes from 2004 to 2006) are pretty impressive.

**Q:** Except for the cameras, which are as much about safety as mobility, what's been done since then?

**A:** In September 2006, we did a survey and traffic flow measurements that showed flexible working hours (adopted voluntarily by more than 140 companies to test the impact) reduced commuting time.

We also reached an agreement with TxDOT to have uniformed officers directing traffic at major road construction closures.

And we're rebuilding infrastructure and removing legal obstacles to help revitalize neighborhoods, while continuing to develop rapid transit so that we can support high-rise density. This October, there's a 40-story apartment being built in downtown, and it's no coincidence that it is two blocks off Main Street.

**Q:** Overall, where do we stand?

**A:** We've made progress. We've also been fighting some headwinds, but they're good headwinds: Last year, one out of 22 new jobs in the United States were added in the Houston metro area. That's amazing. It's incredible.

Houston is growing explosively, but we've been able to avoid worse gridlock, I think, because of the numerous initiatives we put in place.

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