

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
The History of Public Transportation in Houston

Interviewee: Tom Lambert

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Interviewer: Ben Lueders

Transcriber: Ethan O'Donnell

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Abstract:

Tom Lambert, the CEO of Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County discusses the history of transit in Houston, including popular modes of travel and the reasons for their popularity. The interview focuses on the period immediately preceding and since the creation of METRO in 1979 to reorganize public transit in Houston and the surrounding areas. The company quickly made a large impact on Houston's transportation infrastructure, and drastically improved the state of public transit in the city. Mr. Lambert details METRO's strategies for successfully reinventing transit in Houston, detailing several proposals, many of which were successful and others that were never implemented. Lastly, he discusses recent attempts by METRO to improve and streamline service in the Houston area, including the development of Houston's METRO Rail service, which began service in 2004.

Mr. Lambert also discusses numerous expansions that have occurred in the city of Houston, as well a number of future expansions that will help alleviate congestion. He discusses plans such as further developments to the METRO Rail system and a transition to a grid system that will tie METRO into more employers. Mr. Lambert also discusses METRO's partnerships including those with TranStar and the Gulf Coast Rail District.

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BL: This is Ben Lueders interviewing Tom Lambert on March 4, 2015, METRO Headquarters offices. Mr. Lambert, as leadership in the company, could you tell me a little bit about your time with METRO?

TL: Well, I've been with METRO since 1979, so in my thirty-sixth year at METRO. The agency was created on January 1, 1979. I started in October of '79, so I've been here pretty well since the start of the agency. I came in as a security investigator before we had a police department, then we created the police department. I was the first police chief for METRO and was a police chief for about 28 years, then became the chief administrative officer, executive vice president, and then the interim president, and now I'm serving as the president/CEO as well. I've had the permanent position since March of 2014. So, about a year now.

BL: Okay. So, METRO, as you said began in 1979, it replaced the poorly organized collection of local transit systems and it's become a really successful public transportation agency. I saw that it's got the most-used bus service in Texas. How did METRO facilitate that change from such, kind of a, poor presence to what it is now?

TL: I give a lot of credit to the board of directors at that time and then, subsequently, over the years. METRO was created- there was a private bus company that ran bus service in the region, probably up until about 1977. Then, in 1977, I think the city of Houston took over the private operator, and when the voters approved METRO, then METRO assumed that operation. But what happened is, there was a general manager by the name of Allen Keeper that came to Houston in 1982 and he went back to basics on bus service. His focus was on making sure the buses were safe, they were clean, they were well-maintained, operators were very well-trained, and the whole system really focused on how you provided a quality day-to-day service. So I give him a lot of credit and I give the board a lot of credit for really focusing on making sure that we delivered a quality product every day. So I think that goes a lot, and since I've had the opportunity to serve as president, we've gone back to that approach and it's really down to basics. If you do the basic things right, everything else will be okay and that's what we're paying attention to as well.

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BL: Since the car took off, really after World War II, Houston's kind of had this image of this sprawling city. It's connected by all these big freeways. In recent decades, there's been a move of people back towards the city center. What could that increase in density mean for the future of public transportation in Houston?

TL: I think there's a lot of things and I'll do the Main Street Rail Line's a perfect example. We did the rail lines in 2004 and if you go from 2004 to today, you seen a lot of development along the Main Street corridor. What you're seeing now is urban development where you're looking at walkability. You're looking at how people can live, work, play, entertain close to where they live and transit plays a very important role of that. And you've seen, I think the number's over \$8,000,000,000 of development, about a quarter-mile off the Main Street line since it was built. If you just look at downtown Houston today, more residential coming in, more office towers being built. We're very blessed in this community with a growing economy and more people moving here. So, the more you can get transit to be part of the inner play of how people travel around the community, how friendly you make that to pedestrians and folks that cycle, the more you get that opportunity to really manage the movement of people as the community continues to grow. I think that's been a great benefit. But the Main Street line's a perfect example of how you can do that.

BL: Kind of building off that answer, do you think one day public transportation or kind of those alternate modes of transportation such as biking or walking could one day reverse Houston's reputation?

TL: I think it's going to take everything we can do as a region and I don't think there's any one approach that's going to solve that problem. And I really put that in the backdrop because, again, we're seeing tremendous growth on an annual basis and probably a doubling of the population with the next fifteen to twenty years. The position we take is it's going to take everything we can do to manage mobility in this region. Transit plays an important role, complete streets, better sidewalks, better access, cycling, walking, more toll roads. It's going to take everything we can do to manage the growth in this community, so it's not going to be one mode, it's going to be a real multi-modal approach that helps us mange that. So, we're going to be a part of that, transit's

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going to play an extremely, extremely important role in that, but's going to take everything we can do to manage that congestion. It's something that we all need to be focused on.

BL: A negative aspect of Houston's traffic congestion and in the city, there's air pollution that is caused by that. I know METRO's made a commitment to lessening its own impact on that pollution. What does that entail?

TL: Running trains, electrical power trains, is going to lessen air pollution. We use clean diesel today, we use hybrid electric diesel buses, next year we are getting our first order of CNG buses. So, the more we can do to really manage how we have a fleet that's a very clean fleet is very important, but I'll go beyond that. The more we tie transit into cycling, to people's walkability, every one of our buses are equipped with bicycle racks. As we get more trains, we'll open up bicycle use during all operating hours on-rail. So, we're going to do those things that we tie-in the transit system and the transit network to tie into bikeways and cycling and walking. How we work with developers as they're developing projects to plan for transit's value-add to that development is going to be very important as well. Working with the city, the county, the Texas Department of Transportation, Houston – Galveston Area Council, and all the things we can do to work with everybody to provide more alternative forms of transportation is going to help air quality and we are a non-attainment area and we all have to stay focused to make sure we continue to do things that improve air quality in our region and overall quality of life in our region.

BL: In the past, the *Houston Chronicle* published a few studies finding that most of the Houstonians who use public transportation are those who can't afford other options. This is back a few decades ago, actually, I think in the late nineties. I think that was before METRO's Park & Ride system really took off. Has that system increased ridership among people who have access to other modes of transportation?

TL: Yeah and Ben, we can get the numbers for you, I don't have it in front of me, but if you look at the average income, household income for Park & Ride, you'll see it's pretty good in this region. We had a 4.2% increase in Park & Ride ridership last year and we're seeing more and

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more people will use that as a choice travel. You know, you can save money by using transit where you might have two cars in a household today, well if you get transit as an alternative, maybe you only need one. So, there's different approaches people take but the Park & Ride system is almost- you hear a lot of people today talking about bus rapid transit. Well, we've had bus rapid transit in this region for about thirty years. Our Park & Ride system are very efficient operations. You leave a Park & Ride facility, you have a direct access ramp that feeds you into an HOV lane, you have a dedicated lane that you come into downtown, it's very reliable, it's safe, it moves a lot of people every day, and it's very convenient, it's very economical, and we're seeing more and more people will choose to use it. Now, when you have economic downturns and people don't have employment, that will hurt that service. But what we're seeing is a continuous growth in the region with more jobs coming in every year, more people moving into our community. We think Park & Ride, HOV service is a part of the whole transit scheme we need to be doing going forward. So, ridership on Park & Ride is up. We expect that to continue.

BL: METRO actually helped invent that system of the express buses and the HOV lanes.

TL: Actually, it goes back to 1978, it was called a contraflow lane back then. What was happening in 1978 is- unlike today, 'cause it's different today- back then, you may have, in the morning your traffic is very heavy coming into town but going out of town it was not that heavy. So, the contraflow operation in the morning took one of the outbound lanes and they put cones in the ground and we ran buses on that contraflow lane. In the afternoon, your traffic was heavy going out of town but wasn't as heavy coming into town so we did the same thing going out for that contraflow operation. That was really the foundation that then led into, I guess it was about 1984 when the first HOV lane was built behind barriers, dedicated lane. But contraflow, that's where it really started and I think we, as a region, served as one of the catalysts to expand that across the country and it served us very well.

BL: Before the huge increase in automobile ownership took place in the 1900s, a major form of transportation in Houston was the electric streetcar. METRO Rail, which the original line opened up in 2004 as you mentioned, could kind of be seen as a resurrection of that service. What factors made now the right time for passenger rail to come back to Houston?

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TL: I think it was- and again, I give a lot of credit to Mayor Lee Brown. Mayor Lee Brown was the mayor of Houston that made a commitment to build a rail in this community. It was also a vote of the public in 2003 to support, not only the Main Street Line but the expansion of rail in this community as well as expanding bus service and Park & Rides and all that. So, what you see today with all the rail lines being expanded, that came from that 2003 referendum. But Mayor Brown had a commitment through the METRO board to build a Main Street line. It is the second-highest utilized light rail system in the country, per passenger mile behind Boston and now we're beginning to see it being expanded in the neighborhoods. So, we're seeing about 50,000 people a day using the rail line that goes from that Northline Transit Center to the University of Houston – Downtown to downtown to the Medical Center through the Museum District to Fannin South there at NRG Stadium Complex. It's proven that people, when given a choice with alternative forms of transportation, they will use it. Again, it comes at every six minutes on the Main Street line downtown, every twelve minutes on the extension, you know it's coming, you don't need to look for it because you know it's going to be very reliable when people use it. And it's been a tremendous benefit for special events. The rodeo in Houston, as you know, is one of the largest special events we do every year. Last year, we had 1.2 million passenger trips serving that complex and the museum district and all that during spring break. So, people use that.

BL: Based on the success of that, there are two new lines of METRO Rail opening up in April, I believe. If those are successful, could those lines serve as catalysts for further expansion of the system?

TL: Yeah, I think. The board is committed to implement the 2003 referendum that was approved by the voters. All things come in time. We're now working with the Uptown Management District, I'm not sure if you're heard of this. They are funding to build a bus rapid transit guideway cord, if you will, that will tie-in to our Northwest Transit Center, will come on a bus lane that's going to be built and funded by the Texas Department of Transportation and the Uptown Management District that will be bus-only coming over the 610 loop that will then feed into Post Oak Boulevard where the BRT will operate, to a new transit center that's going to be

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built on the south end of Post Oak, the Bellaire/Uptown Transit Center. It's going to operate like, if you will, rubber tire rail. It'll run about every six minute headway, it'll have low-boarding platforms, have the amenities that you have on a rail platform, but you can count on regular service. We'll also connect it to our entire Park & Ride network that serves the 290 quarter, the Interstate 10 West quarter, and the 59 Southwest Freeway quarter. So, you're bringing commuters in on a very well-operated Park & Ride network. They come in, if they're going to the Galleria, we can use the BRT to distribute them to the Galleria. At the same time, we are going to tie that in to the entire brand-new bus network that we'll be implementing in August of this year. So, we think that that project then begins to connect where we then have the university line that the voters approved and the board is now committed to still do that. It's the timing of when we can do that and the funding available to do that. We're trying to look at the opportunity to look at even other modes, whether it's BRT or it's rail, is getting a high-capacity, high-frequency service that gets people where they need to go.

BL: Despite its success, expansions to the light rail have been met with some strong opposition in Houston. What do you believe is the cause of some resistance that is being met?

TL: Well, the one great thing about this community: people are very passionate about their views. And that's what you want and I could use a perfect example on the new bus network the board just approved, and we'll talk about that a bit down the road a bit if you want.

BL: Right.

TL: But people are very passionate about what they think is the best way to spend public funds to improve transportation. So, I think what we need to do is see where we get to a point where everybody gets a common ground. And the common ground is everybody knows we've got to continue to manage people to move in our region, and we've got to do that in a fashion where we sustain the continued growth we're seeing here. That's why I say it's not simply transit's going to be the solution, it's got to be everything we can do. I think you're beginning to see the more we see rail-line operation and we see the benefits of that, again. In all fairness, we've got one line operating today. As the two new lines come in, we'll continue to monitor that performance

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and see what the benefits are that derive from there. We'll also be taking the bus network, which will always be the backbone of transit in Houston because of the size of our service area, which is very, very large, and the ability to adapt to changing conditions with that, but that bus network will also tie-in to the rail network. That bus network ties into the Park & Ride network where you're tying in local service. So, it's really got to be an integrated approach but there have been very strong views that we ought to be a multi-modal region in how we solve transportation problems and METRO agrees with that, and it's just a process going forward. METRO has also been a very long-standing partner at Houston TranStar. Houston TranStar is a regional transportation and emergency management center. It's funded by METRO, the city of Houston, Harris County, and the Texas Department of Transportation. It, basically, can manage- well, if you wake up in the morning and you watch the local traffic reporters on the TV stations, they're getting all of those camera shots and all that information from TranStar. So, it's about how do we manage traffic, how do we manage the instance, how do we leverage more transit to serve more jobsites, more employment, more education, and it's really a little bit of everything. So, the great thing about this community is people are passionate in their views, but we also get to a common ground when it makes good sense, we tend to get on board and work together, move forward. I think that's what you'll see us continue to do in the future.

BL: Definitely.

TL: Okay.

BL: You mentioned the new system of buses. How long coming was that? Is it a big, complicated process to conduct?

TL: It's very complicated. If you take a look at the bus network today and you go back to one of your earlier questions about the Houston street car system, the bus network today is basically the same as the street car system in 1929. Now, we've done little adjustments off of it, we've run different branches off of bus routes, but we really haven't taken a very serious look at changing that network since then. We've been doing that. If you look at where we're at today, and I'd encourage you to go to RideMETRO.org, our website, 'cause everything about the existing bus

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route and all the changes we're making to the new network are all on our website. So, where you have a bus network that has three high-frequency routes today- and high-frequency is you've got a bus coming in fifteen minutes or less during the peak, during the day. We're going to go to 23 bus routes that are high-frequency. Instead of making everybody come downtown, about 80% of our customers are forced to come downtown, even though they don't want to come downtown and they then have to reverse going back out to where they wanted to go. That's being changed with a grid system that ties you in to more employment centers, a million people to a million jobs. That's what this new network will do: getting people to more high-activity centers. We've got downtown, we've got the Texas Medical Center, our major activity centers, but we've also got uptown, Greenway Plaza, the energy corridor, Greenspoint. So, it's going to serve those activity centers as well. We project that we'll get a 20% increase in bus ridership within two years of that new network being established and this becomes a foundation to continue to grow the network. So, we're excited about it and it's been about an 18 month process so far. We'll implement that new network in August of this year. So, a lot of things are in the works to do that as well.

BL: Are we running out of time here?

TL: No, you keep going, I'm okay.

BL: Okay. In the early 20th century, back kind of when the street car was around, there was a really popular inter-urban rail line between Houston and Galveston. It has been thought that METRO is interested in reviving this service.

TL: Actually, I'm going to give credit, that would really be something- There's the Gulf Coast Rail District that's been established, and METRO is working in partnership with the Gulf Coast Rail District that is looking at commuter rail. So, it's really something that they would be looking at and then METRO will partner with them. That look is really being done by the Gulf Coast Rail District. They're looking at that, they're also looking at some other possibilities for commuter rail whether it's out 90A or 290. So, they're doing a lot of things in that. METRO's

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just working very closely with them and we'll support them in whatever leadership role they go from there. That's really their role.

BL: You mentioned it earlier, but a recent movement in urban planning is that of complete streets. They're paved roadways that are built to safely accommodate cars, buses, bicyclists, pedestrians, and then light rail in some cases. Does METRO have any plans to work with the city of Houston as a proponent to this movement?

TL: Can I just say "Yes?" And we've been working with director Patrick Walsh from the planning department of the city, Public Works Director Dale Rudick, and we have staff working closely with their teams as the city develops a general plan that will lead into complete streets as Public Works looks to implement that as a redesign streets and build that. We're working very closely with them and we really applaud them for taking this initiative on. We're working very closely with them.

BL: In your time here at METRO, what do you believe has been the most important improvement to public transportation in Houston if you could pin it down to a single item?

TL: I don't know that you can. I think that the thing that probably is the best thing that METRO does is we have not lost sight that you have to have a multi-modal approach to transportation. The one thing we continue to build on, and again I want to compliment the Board of Directors, because they recognize that we have to partner with every agency, with every entity that's got a role in helping people move through this region. So, our philosophy is not to work in isolation. We want to work in partnership. And again, it's not just what transit can bring, it's how can transit bring better mobility that moves people safely and efficiently through the region by a multi-modal approach that's got transit, streets, cycling, pedestrians, you name it. 'Cause it's going to take everything we can do. Then, how do we work with the developmental community, management districts, to make sure that as they're looking to build to the future that transit-oriented development becomes a part of their thought process. How do we really reach out before someone makes a decision that they're going to build, they factor transit into that. So, we're learning as we go along, but I think the one thing that we've recognized over the years and

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sometimes you hit it and you miss it, but we're really trying to get back onto it now is that everything we do has to be in a multi-modal approach and I think that's something that will never leave this agency. That's got to be a part of our whole thought process, it's got to be a part of the culture of the agency. We're trying to make sure we continue to do that.

BL: You may have hit on it with that answer, but moving forward what are your hopes or visions for the future of public transportation in Houston and the surrounding areas?

TL: The reality is the folks that live in our community don't look at geographical boundaries that says, "Okay, well here's the city limit and it stops here, and here's the county governance limit and it stops there. Here's where you start a new county." What they're really looking at is how can they just move to where they need to move and how can they travel to where they need to travel. TranStar is a perfect model in my view and I'm very proud of METRO's role at TranStar, because that center really serves a greater region than just the city of Houston and Harris County. I think that's part of what we do, it's not so much that METRO should operate all the transit service in the surrounding region but METRO surely ought to be cooperating with every transit provider, and I'll just talk transit specifically on this now, that if Woodlands has got a service that they're operating and they're running that service into Harris County and into the city of Houston, we ought to be fully cooperating with them of how we make transit a seamless approach. Because the people they're going to bring in from The Woodlands are going to come into the city of Houston and they're going to use our local service as a distributing network to get where they need to go. So, we need to work very closely to them in a seamless approach. You're going to see that continue to grow; Fort Bend County is growing very large and their transit continues to grow. So, how do we work more closely with them to make their transit coming into the region more seamless? How do we work on a regional fair policy that if you pay for The Woodlands' service you can use that fair to use a METRO service? So, that's where I see the vision of the region going in the future. It may be that there's also a desire that more folks would want to come in and join the METRO system. I think we're going to have to continue to work together, and again through the board members that serve this agency, working with all the elected officials, working with all of the leaders in the community of how do we make sure we're

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getting the biggest bang for the public dollar. That's going to be something very important to us. And then, how do we make transit as seamless as we can in serving this region and prepare ourselves to manage the expansion of those services for a growing population. That's what I see us working on in the future.

BL: I think that mostly wraps up my questions.

TL: Good.

BL: I think we touched on that.

TL: Good luck! I want to get a copy of your project when you're through, though, can I?

BL: Definitely, yeah.

TL: Okay, cool. That's all I got. Anything else you need from me?

BL: I don't think so.

TL: Let me give you my cards, too.

BL: Thank you very much.

TL: Well, good luck to you.

BL: Thank you.

