

Luncheon Keynote Address

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Thank you, Chuck, for the introduction. And I want to thank the Center for Houston's Future for inviting me here today to your "Counting on Quality of Place" Symposium. This important dialogue on Quality of Place Indicators critical for the greater Houston region, along with the release of the Center's second edition of its Environment Indicator Report, is vitally important to help educate and inform decision-makers and policy-makers, as well as the general public, and to raise awareness about the state of the region's quality of place, the progress that has been made, and the issues that still remain.

The Center's expressed vision is to "advance the Houston region as one of the top ten global communities in which to live and work." I applaud and commend the Center for this vision and the continuing efforts to engage the community to think long-term and act strategically for the future economic, physical, social and cultural well being of the region through research, facilitation and collaboration.

Let me begin by sharing with you a brief quote that I believe appropriately sets the stage for my remarks and their context to the Center's vision and mission:

"This undulating region is probably as desirable a country for all the wants and necessities of man as any other on earth. ... it presents a landscape at once pleasing to the eye, and cheering to the imagination, which in its fancy fills the scene under view with fine forms, the abode of health, plenty, cheerfulness, and happiness." -- Stephen F. Austin [1828].

You see, from the days of basic wilderness to today's 21st century global economic powerhouse, people, businesses and industries have come, and will continue to come, to Texas and make Texas their homes in large part because of the precious environment, bountiful natural resources and good quality of life that have defined Texas --- that have defined the Houston region. Our abundant human and natural resources and our environment are integral features of strong economic growth ... and they must be protected and fostered if Texas' economy is to stay strong and growing. Economic development and growth can, and must, be balanced with protection of our environment and conservation of our natural resources. That balancing is our challenge --- it is our responsibility!

But, for too many years we have treated our environment with recklessness, or in some cases, outright disregard. Smog has too often darkened our blue Texas skies; waterways, such as the Houston Ship

Channel, have caught fire in the past; our fish and wildlife have been starved of nurturing habitat; and toxic wastes have threatened our communities and our very health.

Some of you may be old enough to remember the classic TV public service ad with the stoic Indian Chief Iron Eyes Cody gazing out over the distant western lands --- and then, without words, a tear rolls down his cheek. Didn't you feel something when you heard the words, "People start pollution, people can stop it." That ad expressed for millions something we all probably already felt inside but had not really ever expressed ourselves. It moved us to think; it moved us to begin to act. Nationwide, public opinion about the environment is astir. Americans feel the urgency to act and have begun to express that urgency more and more. Today, I believe we are a nation --- and a State --- ready to change environmentally. The Houston region stands today at the threshold of that change in a major leadership role.

We all know that the population of Texas is predicted to double to a staggering 40+ million by 2050, and the Houston region is expected to see at least comparable growth. As our population swells --- we are faced with serious challenges relating to our air, our water, and our waste. More people means more pollution, and fewer and fewer reasonable options to adequately address that reality. Given the kind of population growth predicted, along with current land use trends, urban areas will continue to sprawl and suburbia will continue to grow further into our rural areas. Texas' 5 most populous counties --- Harris, Tarrant, Dallas, Travis and Bexar --- are already almost totally urbanized.

As to garbage and other wastes, more people means more waste, regardless of whether it is minimized through source reduction, recycled, composted or destined for landfills. With the predicted population explosion, the fundamental question we face is whether we will have, or can make, disposal space for all the wastes that will be generated. As urban areas expand to accommodate all our residents, there will be less space, both physically and practically available for siting new, or expanding existing, waste disposal facilities.

In the coming years, our water resources will also be strained by the continuing population boom. More people means more demands on or impacts to our water resources, which must be judiciously conserved and protected if Texas is to continue to thrive with at least the quality of life we enjoy today. Today, many of us look at our rivers, lakes, bays and estuaries and water appears plentiful. Even when we experience drought-like conditions like we experienced this past year, water still flows freely from our faucets, water hoses and sprinkler systems. We simply assume we have plenty of water to go around; we simply take our water for granted.

But government, in partnership with industries, businesses, cities and every citizen, has to methodically and effectively plan and prepare for the reality that we are going to have more people in Texas than our current water infrastructure can support. And, certainly, the expected dramatic increase in demand and use of our water resources will make the protection of the quality of our water resources a significant challenge as well; but a challenge that in no way can receive diminished attention. The availability and quality of our water will always be critically linked to our health, our quality of life, and the economic success of Texas.

And air quality is a huge environmental challenge facing Texas --- facing Houston --- the largest challenge, I believe --- significantly affecting our quality of life, the health of our citizens, and the strength of our economy. In major metropolitan areas like Houston, air quality problems often seem insurmountable because pollutant levels are driven by many diverse sources, including: emissions from vehicles; toxic pollutants emitted by more than 400 chemical manufacturing facilities, including 2 of the 4 largest refineries in the U.S.; the huge petrochemical complex along the Houston Ship Channel and the Port of Houston; and many small operations spread geographically across Greater Houston, such as surface coating processes, dry cleaners and gas stations, to name a few.

Here in the Houston area, we have consistently failed to meet national air quality standards for ozone in the past. In October 2004, the Houston Chronicle reported that air quality in Houston had fallen below Los Angeles to the worst in the United States. According to 2008 data, air quality in Houston from an ozone standpoint “improved” to the 4th worst in the nation, just behind Los Angeles, Bakersfield and Visalia in the San Joaquin Valley. In certain areas in and around Houston, such as the East Side, the levels of air toxics are simply too high, and must be addressed effectively and timely because of the threat posed to public health. And we all know that Texas ranks 1st in the nation and 8th in the world in greenhouse gas emissions. The Gulf Coast area right here is the epicenter of these emissions, with Harris County leading all counties in the nation in CO2 emissions!

While air quality in Houston has a troubled past, we have the opportunity and the ability to make great strides toward cleaner air and a healthier environment for the people of Houston. Despite Houston’s history of air pollution, we have begun, and are continuing, to take steps necessary to create a far more positive outlook for the future. Just as the Milby Park area has been a hot spot of toxic air pollution, it is also an example of the progress we are beginning to make. Pollution monitors there are showing that concentrations of cancer-causing butadiene are at their lowest levels. Just as Houston recently led the nation as the worst in ozone pollution, thanks to concerted cleanup efforts, favorable weather conditions

and economic conditions that have reduced some emissions-producing sources, in 2009 Houston will achieve the current ozone standard by the thinnest of margins --- for the first time ever. But remember, all these efforts have been based on the current ozone standard of 85 parts per billion. Now, as just announced 2 weeks ago, we're facing a new, more stringent ozone standard that will be no higher than 70 ppb – maybe as low as 60 ppb. This tougher standard will likely have a profound effect on Texas, which could find more than 25 additional counties out of compliance. Areas exceeding the current standard will be further away from compliance, and some areas now meeting the current standard will be noncompliant or close to it. And, undoubtedly, this new standard will also have a profound effect on the Houston area where we have a carbon-intensive economic base and an auto-dependent way of life. To stress this point, right now, none of Houston's ozone monitors would meet a standard below 70; and only one would likely meet 70. Yet I believe the new standard will be achievable if we focus on cleaner technologies for our industrial facilities and our vehicles and expansion of our public transportation efforts.

I believe that efforts to improve our air quality must include higher standards designed to protect public health --- setting levels below which it is considered unsafe to breathe the air. And I believe that emissions from businesses, industries and our vehicles should be reduced to meet these tighter standards. In addition, our standards should be regularly adjusted in accordance with progress we have made. Technological advancements have made it possible to reduce air emissions without compromising economic competitiveness, and our standards should reflect those increased capabilities. But, too often, we are content with the status quo when we are capable of doing more, a mindset which limits the amount of progress that we are able to achieve. None of us, especially those whose responsibility it is to protect our environment and our public health, should consider greater protectiveness as an “illusion” and insist instead on maintaining the status quo.

We can't relax our focus or our efforts and, like Scarlett O'Hara, simply say: “tomorrow is another day” – “we'll worry about attaining higher standards when we're forced to.” We must all continue to work diligently and timely to achieve cleaner and healthier air as soon as possible. I firmly believe that can happen if we remain committed. Plain and simple --- this is about a lot more than meeting some federal regulatory standard or deadline. This is about a Houston --- no, a Texas --- public health and quality of life issue.

Yes, we have made significant, positive progress towards cleaning up our air in Houston, but we still have a long way to go. This effort is of utmost importance in helping to ensure that this region remains a safe and prosperous place to live. In many cases, simply meeting minimal federal measures will not

get us to our goals; we will have to push harder and stretch further than we ever have in the past to make a significant difference. We have no room for complacency, no room for the status quo, and no room for old ways of thinking. Ensuring that Houston has a cleaner and healthier environment now and in the future requires us to incorporate new approaches and new ways of thinking. As Einstein said, “We cannot solve problems with the same thinking we had when we created those problems.”

We all surely agree that the bottom line is protecting the citizens of this region and Texas by providing a cleaner and healthier environment in a manner that is reasonably consistent with fostering a sound economic climate. I firmly believe we can do that --- we **MUST** do that! But we cannot continue to miss important opportunities to act as we work diligently toward these already difficult challenges. To achieve our goals, we all have to work in full coordination and cooperation, not at odds, either with each other, or as to the ultimate outcome. We have to set aside any and all ideas that the status quo will get us there and fully realize that we likely must make major adjustments in many aspects of our private lives and our businesses and industries to succeed. And we must accept the fact that we may not always be able to limit the costs of these necessary adjustments --- but we cannot afford to avoid those costs! Yes, a lot is at risk. Yes, it will be expensive. Yes, we will unquestionably face situations where we will likely make some controversial, or flat out unpopular, decisions in order to achieve the greater good for all our citizens. But we have no choice but to face those challenges and make those tough decisions. Time and time again we Texans have proven we can meet tough challenges. We have to start now openly discussing the tough issues and aggressively pursuing possible solutions. Dynamic and effective measures and initiatives, implemented now, that focus on prudent planning, good science, and fiscal responsibility will save our future generations the expense of cleaning up what we leave behind and provide a good quality of life for all Texans to come.

An unknown poet once wrote: “I shall walk this way but once. Therefore, whatever good I might do, let me do it now, for I shall never walk this way again.” Think about that. We shall never walk this way again. So, as we move forward in all our challenges and endeavors, let’s recognize that **THIS** is our opportunity to make a difference. **THIS** is our opportunity to work together. **THIS** is our opportunity to make the necessary commitments. **THIS** is our opportunity to make Houston and the Gulf Coast region a shining example of economic prosperity and environmental quality. I am confident that we will make real progress towards that end when we seize this opportunity.

And when we hear the inevitable “doom’s day” forecasts that enhanced environmental protection will surely cause our economy to suffer here at home and in the global marketplace, let us also remember

that Texas, and Houston, is enjoying one of the strongest and most extensive economic development eras in history. In fact, Houston is an excellent example to dispel the myth that enhanced environmental protection will stall an economic engine, given that Houston has experienced tremendous economic growth in recent years. All of this prosperity has occurred while Texas and Houston are dealing with major and far-reaching environmental issues and challenges, and while significant efforts have been made by every sector to improve our environment. Texas and Houston have shown we can continue to improve our environment and our quality of life while ensuring a sound and growing economy. We must continue that sound approach.

Some of you may be my age and remember President John F. Kennedy's May 25, 1961, speech in which he set the national goal of landing man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth before the decade ended. Just 8 years later, on July 20, 1969, we landed man on the Moon! From that challenge in May 1961 until that Sunday in July 1969, we didn't say: "the timeframe is not realistic; the costs are too high and unjustified; our economy will suffer; let's see what others are going to do first; we should do something ... but let's not do it now." No --- we began a dedicated national effort ... significantly centered here in Texas ... centered here in Houston ... with Texas and Houston as the nation's leaders in that effort ... to make that challenge a reality, not just a goal. Science, industry, business, government and individual Americans dedicated themselves to that effort ... and delivered on the commitment ... in the timeframe set out. Yes, it was costly in dollars, and even lives. Yes, it was an arduous and complex task. Yes, it was risky as to its ultimate success. Yes, we had to re-prioritize many things in our national, state, business and individual lives. But it was recognized by all that we had to do it for the national benefit, and --- most importantly --- for the benefit of all mankind.

I firmly believe we owe it to ourselves, our region, our State, our nation, our world --- but most importantly --- our children to come --- to do every thing we reasonably can to protect and enhance our health, our environment, our natural resources, our quality of life AND our economy. And this commitment must not only come from our governments, our businesses and our industries, it must come equally from each one of us, because every one of us has a personal commitment, a moral obligation and a substantial role in protecting our environment and enhancing our quality of life. I believe we stand at a milestone in history where every individual makes a difference. Just as the late educator, scholar and philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, said, "*There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew.*"