The Quiet Revolution
The Growing Role of Municipal Management Districts in Houston

Executive Summary

Many Houstonians are not aware of the work of municipal management districts (MMDs) and of their growing importance to our city. By adding an increased level of services beyond what city government can provide, MMDs are making a real difference as Houston evolves into a multi-dimensional global city.

In fact, a discussion about governance in Houston that excludes the role of MMDs will lead to misguided conclusions about our city in the 21st century. The outcomes and style of work of MMDs also could be a model for a “Houston style of planning” that serves the visions, values and goals of our citizens with progress toward such coordination already becoming evident during the course of preparing this report.

Since the first MMD was created 25 years ago, a quiet revolution has unfolded as a score of MMDs has emerged within Houston. MMDs are local governments that are independent of any city or county with specific powers granted by the State. Today, MMDs play a profoundly important role in Houston’s quality of life, economic health and tax base as they augment, rather than replace, city services.

The first MMDs were created to provide enhanced services within Houston’s major activity centers, but their reach has expanded to cover central city and outlying communities as well. Because Houston’s MMDs have been created by individual state legislation, each is somewhat unique. Blueprint Houston has determined that Houston’s MMDs can be generally categorized by the type of area they serve — major activity centers, neighborhood commercial corridors and redevelopment zones.

MMDs exist because property owners in a designated area of the city agree to pay a new tax or assessment to address issues of common concern. The funds generated by the tax or assessment are typically (but not always) allocated based on a service plan (or service and improvement plan) that extends over a period of years, just as a general plan can serve as a longer-term strategic plan for a city. Ongoing stakeholder involvement is essential, and an MMD can cease to operate due to lack of funds if this support is lost. Instead, MMDs have evolved to provide an ever-wider range of services as their stakeholders have grown more comfortable with this new form of local government.

Nineteen active MMDs provide services that augment city services for an aggregate cost of less than 2% of the City of Houston’s General Fund budget. Three more Houston MMDs have been created but were not yet operating at the time of this report.

The work of MMDs can help set the stage for a strategic general plan for Houston in the 21st Century:

MMDs and a General Plan for Houston: Blueprint Houston is developing an outline for a new type of general plan for the 21st century and will be making a proposal to the City. Based on the results of this report, this plan should involve citizens through super-neighborhoods and businesses through MMDs as long-term growth priorities and policies are developed and focus on (i) a strategic vision and broad policy context that allows some variance from its typical “one size fits all” policies that can strangle new forms of growth (for example, the parking ordinance would benefit from this approach), (ii) growth and improvement by districts, and (iii) the capital web of infrastructure the City supports. Our large city can then be broken into manageable districts with details resolved by MMDs and communities working with city government within this policy and capital investment framework.

Funding for a General Plan: In addition to MMD participation in the planning process, the City’s TIRZs could help fund planning within each TIRZ and also in areas that lie between them. Planning grants involving TIRZ and MMD matching funds also could be “over-matched” to provide some extra funding to extend planning outside the boundaries of those MMDs and TIRZs.

Strategic Redevelopment: MMDs have been essential partners in areas targeted for transformation because they can assume costs and long-term obligations associated with urban public improvements that the City cannot. The City should encourage creation of MMDs in areas primed for transformation to replicate these successes elsewhere. It also could support creation of MMDs that provide services in under-developed areas of its extra-territorial jurisdiction to prepare those areas for possible annexation.

An Antidote to Term Limits: To encourage long-term thinking among elected officials constrained by strict term limits, mayoral candidates could develop six-year plans for their hoped-for term in office that are similar to the multi-year service plans that guide most MMDs. These proposals would include specifics in outline form, such as allocation of resources, specific program priorities, and meaningful economic development objectives in a format established by an objective civic organization, such as the League of Women Voters, and then emphasized during the campaign. These outline proposals could form the basis for a detailed update to the general plan that reflects the newly-elected mayor’s mandate. Voters then could benchmark progress against the original outline proposal in subsequent elections.

Moving Forward toward a True General Plan: The most striking part of the MMD story is that property owners have agreed to a new tax or assessment to address issues of common concern, but they also can “pull the plug” if things are not working out, resulting in a real focus by MMDs on continued stakeholder engagement. Houston could use the same approach to test the benefits of a general plan by stipulating a period of time and committing to citizen-stakeholder engagement. If the general plan does not produce measurable benefits by the end of the stipulated time period, citizens could pull the plug.

The full report is available on-line at: www.blueprinthouston.org
713-522-0590

Blueprint Houston thanks Houston Endowment Inc., the MMD Community and Hawes Hill Calderon LLC Please note that no MMD has endorsed this report.
MMDs typically focus on commercial and multi-family properties; only one MMD assesses single family homeowners (at their request). Their services focus on public safety, economic development, marketing and promotion, multi-modal transportation, landscaping, cleanliness and planning. Active MMDs cover 198 square miles of the City and directly serve primarily commercial and multi-family properties with a total taxable value of over $32 billion, which is close to one quarter of the city’s tax base.

Half of Houston’s MMDs assess (or tax) for capital improvements, such as improved sidewalk areas in conjunction with roadway projects funded by other agencies, entry markers into their districts, median landscaping and overhead utility removal. Assessments or taxes range from $0.045/$100 to just over $0.15/$100 of property value. By comparison, the City of Houston’s ad valorem tax rate is just under $0.64/$100. These taxes and assessments fund annual operating budgets that range from less than $400,000 to over $6,000,000.

Please reference the one-page insert (pages 5-6) for a map showing areas of the city served by MMDs and some basic facts and figures. Blueprint Houston’s full report on this subject provides many more details on the history, services and other issues related to Houston’s MMDs.

Even with an overall record of success and support, MMDs have had their share of controversy focused on the actual level of stakeholder support for their assessments and the fair distribution of services provided by funding from only certain types of property owners. Thus far, MMDs have proven to be remarkably committed to their communities and the improvement of many areas of the city, but future success will require that this high level of commitment be maintained among future leaders.

Beyond facts and figures about Houston’s individual MMDs, the city’s bigger story—how do MMDs represent a major asset for our community as it seeks to adapt to a changing world. Historically, Houston grew by expanding outward, but continuation of this growth strategy is unlikely. MMDs can play a key role in a new strategy focused on economic growth and development from within the city.

Blueprint Houston recommends that our elected state officials, the MMD community and the City of Houston consider the following ideas to maximize the benefits of MMDs and their potential as collaborative partners for the City:

**The State of Texas should increase the long-term effectiveness of and support for MMDs:**

**Creation Process:** While MMDs can be created through the TCEQ, most are created by the State Legislature, and its notice requirements should be strengthened so stakeholders are aware of what is happening in Austin. The special conditions in major activity centers also should be noted because their MMD legislation often serve as models for new MMDs in other parts of the state where the number and types of property ownership can be very different.

**MMD Boundaries:** Criteria for the geographic and economic composition of new MMDs could better ensure that stakeholders with common interests are included. This could reduce confusing situations, such as the recent creation of an MMD that overlaps with a pre-existing MMD, and also rationalize boundaries so small areas are not isolated between areas served by MMDs.

**Transparency:** The State should clarify its administrative oversight of MMDs with regard to reporting and audit review to ensure that MMD public reports are filed and readily available to our citizens through state government in addition to the MMDs themselves.

**Areas without an MMD:** MMDs work when there is strong support from within the community and compelling conditions that need to be addressed. Some areas of the city, such as those with consistent deed restrictions and limited commercial development, probably do not need an MMD, and the State should not go too far in creating new MMDs.

**Ongoing State Review:** The State Legislature should periodically review the work and effectiveness of MMDs. The “Special Report Prepared for the Texas Senate Intergovernmental Relations Committee” at the request of Senator Royce West is the most recent review for MMDs that can enhance their overall effectiveness:

**Capacity Building:** The MMD community would benefit from capacity-building where more established MMDs provide mentoring and guidance to newer MMD staffs. This should include more effort to share best practices among MMDs and even could include an “MMD college.” A recent symposium sponsored by the Westchase District is an excellent example of this idea.

**Collaborative Training:** Together and individually, MMDs should focus on how to work with city and county government. Engaging their staff in this process would help them gain a better understanding of MMDs.

**Better Advance Coordination:** Before making plans to modify City street rights-of-way, MMDs should establish strong ongoing communications with the appropriate departments and involve them in early planning discussions.

**Integrated Planning:** The City is working to assemble an electronic data bases of plans. MMDs should develop or secure the technical ability to add their plans to the City’s electronic data base. Some progress is being made; for instance, City staff is training East End MMD staff to do just this. MMDs also could seek the help and guidance of experienced planners from Houston’s corporations.

**The City of Houston has challenges that a strategy for growth involving MMDs could help address:**

**Partners for Growth:** In the second half of the 20th century, the City of Houston grew through annexation of municipal utility districts (MUDs). The city now can maximize its potential for growth from within by collaborating with the MUD’s counsel, the MMD, in (1) major activity centers where one half million of Houston’s primary jobs are located, (2) districts that combine home and workplaces in neighborhood commercial corridors that are the backbone of our urban fabric, and (3) areas primed for major transformation that can diversify the city’s portfolio of live/work environments and optimize its long-term tax base growth.

**Facilitating Coordination with MMDs:** With so much economic development and city tax base growth possible in areas served by MMDs, the City should collaborate with MMDs in an ongoing, constructive and flexible manner within a general, non-bureaucratic policy context that respects their independent status. Despite concerns among some MMDs to the contrary, the City has no plans to reduce city services in areas served by MMDs. Beyond this wise policy, the City should seek to maximize the effectiveness and benefits of its services and capital investments through true, ongoing collaboration with MMDs.

**City Staff:** A consistent city policy can guide its staff as they interact with MMDs, be it HPD, Public Works & Engineering, Solid Waste, Neighborhoods or the Planning & Development Department. City staff should engage with MMDs as true partners, but to truly do so, the City needs more staff capacity. The Office of the Mayor’s well-regarded senior staff is stretched too thin, and additional staff focused on MMDs could assist with communications and ongoing collaboration. MMDs focus on economic development through a broad range of services, and, unlike most city departments, the Office of the Mayor’s economic development team also tends to look at the “whole” rather than the “parts.”

**Capital Investments:** In addition to ongoing capital improvements by tax increment reinvestment zones (TIRZs) and the capital improvement program (CIP), Rebuild Houston is going to result in much-needed street and drainage investments. Decisions about each project’s scope have planning, up-front cost and long-term maintenance implications, and the role of MMDs in these projects should not be an after-thought left to individual project managers. By policy, MMDs should be partners in the planning, funding and implementation of Rebuild Houston and of all capital investments in their areas of the city. Collaborative prioritization of projects based on the needs in each area and thoughtfully planned allocation of City-MMD responsibilities can best address multiple needs and constituencies for maximum benefit to the entire city. The City should also take advantage of the extensive experience of many MMDs in improving sidewalk areas, multi-modal transportation and the overall pedestrian experience.

**Grant Applications:** The City of Houston is growing more adept at competing for grants to fund its capital projects, an arena where MMDs have an excellent track record. Having already moved beyond viewing MMDs as competitors, the City should develop a strategy and planning framework for grants that regularly engage MMDs as partners. This will increase Houston’s chances for success because many funders require that individual grants be part of a larger planning context. The City’s recent federal TIGER grant award for hike & bike trails is an excellent example of this approach.
This report focuses on the nineteen active MMDs within the city limits of Houston, which have developed a wide range of effective services and improvement programs that deserve the attention and support of Houstonians. They also coordinate with city government, and the pairing of an MMD’s locally-based knowledge and stakeholder support with the City’s considerable resources can result in remarkable progress in terms of economic development, crime reduction, sanitation, quality of life and truly balanced capital investments in the public realm.

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713-522-0590
Municipal Management Districts (MMDs) within the City of Houston

The map below shows twenty-two MMDs within the City of Houston. Of these, nineteen are active and were surveyed and interviewed in 2011 by Blueprint Houston. The three inactive MMDs were created recently by the State Legislature and are still working on obtaining their petitions and developing their service plans. They are the Gulfton Area (8), Hobby Area (9) and Near Northside (14) MMDs. As a result, they have been excluded from the report’s results.

With only a few exceptions, MMDs do not assess nor do they provide services to single family homeowners. Consequently, MMDs that cover large areas only provide services to the commercial properties within those areas, and the tax base served by the MMDs excludes single family residential properties. Multi-family properties are usually assessed because they are treated as commercial properties by taxing entities. This pattern is most evident in the ten MMDs that serve “neighborhood commercial corridors,” so named because the commercial properties in these MMDs tend to occur along major thoroughfare and collector streets, creating corridors where most MMD services are provided. See table on reverse side for more information.

More detailed information is provided in the full report, The Quiet (R)evolution, The Growing Role of Municipal Management Districts in Houston, also published by Blueprint Houston.

February 2013
### Basic Facts about Municipal Management Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MANAGEMENT DISTRICT</th>
<th>SIZE</th>
<th>TAX BASE</th>
<th>PROPERTIES</th>
<th>CREATED</th>
<th>1st SERVICES</th>
<th>EXPANDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(HCID = Harris County Improvement District)</td>
<td>(sq. miles)</td>
<td>($1,000's)</td>
<td>(records)</td>
<td>(year)</td>
<td>(years)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total (excludes Inactive MMDs)</strong></td>
<td>197.89</td>
<td>32,276,332</td>
<td>25,847.00</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Major Activity Centers</strong></td>
<td>22.70</td>
<td>17,208,007</td>
<td>4,490</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston Downtown Management District</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>6,297,000</td>
<td>2,061</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uptown Houston District (HCID #1)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>3,535,211</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>1991/1993</td>
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<td>Greenspoint Management District</td>
<td>12.19</td>
<td>1,861,036</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memorial City Management District</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy Corridor District</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1,654,760</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td><strong>Neighborhood Commercial Corridors</strong></td>
<td>172.12</td>
<td>11,909,385</td>
<td>17,263</td>
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<td>Greater East End Management District</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>1,103,800</td>
<td>3,516</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>Greater Northside Management District</td>
<td>24.00</td>
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<td>4,934</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>Greater Southeast Management District</td>
<td>29.69</td>
<td>1,147,809</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Montrose Management District (HCID#6/ #11)</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1,043,394</td>
<td>1,667</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>Spring Branch Management District</td>
<td>21.70</td>
<td>2,248,939</td>
<td>1,432</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>Near Northwest Management District</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>884,470</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Brays Oaks Management District (HCID #5)</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>1,130,867</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>Greater Sharpstown Management District</td>
<td>13.63</td>
<td>1,670,843</td>
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<td>International Management District</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>1,146,564</td>
<td>1,114</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five Corners Improvement District (HCID #10)</td>
<td>21.60</td>
<td>432,699</td>
<td>1,337</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Redevelopment Zones</strong></td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3,158,940</td>
<td>4,094</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Kirby Management District (HCID #3)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1,697,983</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midtown Management District</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1,156,957</td>
<td>2,956</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Downtown Management District</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>304,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Inactive Districts***

- Hobby Area Management District (HCID #9) | 2009
- Near Northside Management District* | 2011
- Gulfton Management District* | 2011

* Not included in survey totals

Blueprint Houston surveyed most municipal management districts and obtained additional information from the Houston Business Journal’s “Book of Lists.” All figures date to calendar year 2011.

February 2013