



# Kirby connected

By David Crossley

A master plan is in the making for the Upper Kirby District, and of course its heart is Kirby Drive. With any luck, the plan will call for a far more urban kind of avenue, where traffic calming at least from I-59 to Westheimer, and a pedestrian realm at least 12 feet wide proposed for both sides.

Over time, the retail and office spaces will migrate to the sidewalk, parking will move to the rear or interior of the blocks, and a great deal of human activity will characterize the tree-lined, café-filled public realm.

The first priority must be to make it possible, safe, and fun to shop and roam Kirby Drive on foot. The next priority should be a means of moving up and down the boulevard by public transit. Transit is a utility for pedestrians, and the active pedestrian world is incomplete without it.

One of the best pedestrian-transit combinations in the country is the wonderful 16th street pedestrian mall in downtown Denver. There, a clean hybrid-powered shuttle moves constantly up and down the street, acting essentially like a

horizontal elevator. People get on and off it almost spontaneously, using it to shop, get to work, look for fun, or just to explore. There are enough of the shuttles so that if there isn't one at the stop – and there is a stop every block – you can look up the street and usually see one coming. That's all it takes to assure people they're about to get a ride.

Something like that would work well on Kirby, from San Felipe to the Village, ideally. The right lane should be a diamond lane where cars can only use it to turn right, and the shuttle should have the technology to turn traffic lights green. This is a simple service to implement, but getting the design of the transit lane and the vehicle itself right will determine whether it is successful. The Denver shuttle is really just a low-floor bus with a raked-back front windshield that makes it seem not just a bus. There are plenty of good-looking vehicles coming

*Note: This proposal is focused on the Upper Kirby District because it was originally written for the District's Intown magazine. Ultimately, it was not published there.*

along as manufacturers try to break the prejudice against buses through design improvement.

The next step should be improving transit service on the major east-west streets, Westheimer, Alabama, and Richmond. Innovative feeder service should bring people to Kirby along these streets. The shuttles should be distinctive, and only run up and down those corridors, not digressing off to other streets to go to mysterious places. Again, this is a simple service to implement, and again, design will make it or break it. Clean-running, good-looking buses that run often and quickly in a safe environment is really all it takes.

But making the Upper Kirby District work as an important place in the broader urban fabric means also connecting Kirby Drive to other important urban places. The obvious, most important connection will be to the Richmond/Wheeler stop of the Main Street rail line. The next important place to connect Kirby to is Greenway Plaza. Again, the Richmond service should continue west to Greenway Plaza, with stops at Buffalo and Wesleyan.

But Kirby wants to be better connected to the rest of the urban places, too, and clearly it wants to be connected to Uptown/Galleria, which itself will have some sort of advanced north-south transit service soon.



The way to the Galleria is to continue along Richmond to Wesleyan and up it to Westheimer, then to Highland Village and the heart of Uptown, Westheimer at Post Oak Boulevard. That single transit line, then, connects the Galleria to Upper Kirby and to the Main Street rail line, and thus to downtown, the Medical Center, and Reliant Park, not to mention the Hermann Park, the golf course, the zoo, lots of museums and theaters, the top sports venues, and all the other amenities along Main Street.

But what kind of vehicle is this, running along Richmond from Main to the Galleria (and further, to Westchase and the Energy Corridor)? Using light rail would be the height of folly. The right of way needs for light rail would destroy Richmond as the decent urban boulevard it is today and unnecessarily degrade automobile passage. An express bus? That would certainly be an easy first step, and quick to implement.

But a bus really won't do in the long term.

First, because it's too slow, thanks to being caught up in the car traffic, a problem it shares with light rail or any other at-grade service through urban places. The service must be elevated.

And the technology to use from Main Street along Richmond and into the Galleria is what it has always been: high-tech straddle-beam monorail gliding quietly above the trees. The simple infrastructure for this technology is a series of concrete columns spaced about 100 feet apart and spanned by a slender concrete beam. Period. Drill a hole, put in a five-foot diameter concrete column, go down the street and do another one, then set the beam on top of them. And keep moving.

It is important to remember that when the Seattle monorail was built in the middle of a busy downtown street, the street was never closed during construction. Monorail construction is the least disruptive, fastest way to build a high-speed, high-capacity transit service. The straddle-beam variety is also the safest trans-

portation mode on earth, having never had a fatality related to operation.

The economic success of any cooperative region of humans is related to the ability to connect to other places for reasons of trade and knowledge gain. A mobility system as described here not only will give the Upper Kirby District fast, easy access to the physical world, it will give the world access to the Upper Kirby District.

And it gives more people access to the District than is possible if everyone comes in cars, which also require thousands of square feet of potential high-yielding retail, commercial, and even residential space for the temporary storage of large vehicles. The Galleria at Christmas proves access to it is limited because of the mobility system.

For Upper Kirby to have an interesting and lively place in Houston's evolving urban fabric, it needs a long-range mobility plan for the future, and the determination to move now in that direction. Why not go straight to the future?