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## **Houston transit leaders: 'We've got to do more' after Amazon HQ2 rejection**



The Main Street Line in downtown Houston.

GREATER HOUSTON CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU



By **Cara Smith** – Reporter, Houston Business Journal  
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As civic leaders and real estate developers continue the postmortem on **why Houston didn't make Amazon's HQ2 shortlist**, the Bayou City's public transportation challenges in particular have come under scrutiny.

Last week, Seattle-based Amazon.com Inc. released a **list of 20 finalist cities** for its second North American headquarters. While Dallas and Austin are among the e-commerce giant's final picks, Houston didn't make it. Even though Houston has been able to attract dozens of oil and gas companies, Amazon's rejection of Houston suggests that the city may not be as attractive to global entities like Amazon, said Andrea French, executive director of the Transportation Advocacy Group's Houston Region.

"We didn't make the list and two other Texas cities did. So, that kind of stung a little more," French said. "If you look at the cities we compete with globally, and you look at their transportation systems, it's amazing we've been able to (compete) as well as we have."

French stressed the idea that, although public transportation is one piece of the pie, it's inexorably tied to other parts of the city's economy.

"There are absolutely economic opportunities we will miss out on," French said.

Tom Lambert, CEO of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County - or, Metro - agrees.

"The Amazon discussion is all about recognizing the importance of regional transportation," Lambert said. "We've got to do more, not only in the region today, but (for) a robust region that's only going to grow."

In Amazon's request for proposals, the company specifically cited the importance of public transportation as a factor in choosing its next headquarters. Improvements to Houston's public transportation have occurred over the past several years, but Houston's bus system and light rail system, the latter of which provides connections within a small slice of the city, pales in comparison to the transit systems of cities like Chicago, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C., all of which made Amazon's final cut.

Last summer, Metro hosted more than 25 open houses to chat with Metro users, as well as those who don't use Metro's services. The organization has hosted around 100

meetings since to connect with Houstonians and develop relevant improvements that'll improve ridership and access, Lambert said. Metro's currently developing a bolstered regional transit plan, **dubbed Metro Next**, that will address a few things: the unmet needs of current Houstonians, the quality of transportation currently offered and the needs of the roughly 3 million people who are expected to move to Houston by 2040.

So far, Metro has identified several areas of improvement: making sure Metro stops are connected to accessible sidewalks, increasing hours of Metro service, improving bus shelters, transitioning from bus routes to higher capacity transits such as light rail and bus rapid transit, and ensuring all bus stops are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

"The biggest challenge is having enough funding to do what we want to do," Lambert said. "We're looking for additional support from the federal government."

Metro Next is being developed ahead of a potential bond referendum in November 2018. **As of November 2017**, the details, cost and date of the potential referendum still have yet to be determined.

The last major bond for Metro passed in 2003. That \$640 million referendum resulted in seven new Park & Ride lots, eight new transit centers, 23 new light rail stations and 15.2 miles of new light rail track. Most of the goals from the 2003 referendum have been completed. The only shortfall was its plans for the light rail. In 2003, Metro planned to use the referendum to develop a total of 64.8 miles of light rail with 22 miles completed by 2012.

When asked about his broader vision for Houston's regional transit, Lambert described a city with ample multimodal transportation - one where more Houstonians have a Metro bus stop within walking distance, as well as the confidence that their bus, rapid transit bus or light rail would arrive on time.

"There needs to be a bold vision," Lambert said.

French said Amazon's rejection of Houston has a silver lining: It provides a concrete example of a company signaling to Houston that things need to change.

"I can point to (this) and say, 'OK, see? These are economic opportunities we're going to lose out on,'" French said.