



The Boulevard Project: A Conversation with John Breeding of Uptown Houston District



Uptown Houston District, as seen in this rendering, will have transportation and landscaping improvements.

HOUSTON – If you’ve ventured to Uptown Houston lately, a lot is going on in those 500 acres in the heart of Houston. A redevelopment plan, The Boulevard Project, is being put into effect in the area – one of the most vibrant in the country. The vision for the project is to rebuild Post Oak Boulevard into an exquisitely designed grand boulevard while creating a beautifully landscaped pedestrian environment, preserving existing automobile lanes and substantially improving transit service in order to address the continuing growth of Houston.

With 200,000 daily visitors and employees and office towers boasting more than 26 million square feet of commercial space, Uptown Houston is one of the largest business districts in the country with more than 180,000 residents within a three-mile radius. But mobility could be better. Enter The Boulevard Project, designed to solve the area’s crushing mobility problem. The \$121.5 million Boulevard project is one part of a three-prong plan to make it easier to move around the area. To find out how the project is proceeding, Realty News Report spoke with John Breeding, President and CEO of the Uptown Houston District. Before joining the District some 30 years ago, Breeding held positions as Vice President of Operations and Planning at Rice Center, METRO Transit Authority and the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

Realty News Report: The Uptown real estate market is getting denser, more high-rise buildings, both residential and office towers. Long-term – 10 or 20 years – what needs to be done to address the coming growth and density in Uptown?



John Breeding

Breeding: Uptown Houston historically has been a retail location of choice. During 1970s and 1980s, there was an incredible amount of offices built. Since the 1990s, residential has been the growth sector. In the last five years, \$3 billion in projects have opened, including new office buildings — the first ones built since early 1980s. There has been some additional retail that came on line, less than 1 million square feet, and we've added several new hotels. The big growth is that we added 8,000 units of multifamily, some just being completed. The key is not only the densification of Uptown Houston but also the urban mixture that is happening. It's not only office but residential, retail, restaurants, and hotel. If it were all office, the mixture wouldn't be as appealing as it is now. Uptown Houston is a highly desirable place. It's a great destination for tourists as well as business travelers. There is high occupancy in Uptown Houston hotels even on the weekends.

Realty News Report: The Uptown Houston District has a lot of growth going on, such as the expansion at the Galleria, the new Hyatt Regency and the new BHP Billiton office tower. But we know significant changes are planned for Post Oak Boulevard, the main Uptown roadway. Can you summarize what's planned with the boulevard project?



A future evening streetscape on The Boulevard.

Breeding: We are fortunate to be fully engaged with developing response to continued growth, densification and traffic in the area. Ultimately we are not going to build enough freeways to get people where they want to go, so we've worked hard to bring transit to this area. We've worked closely with TxDOT, the Harris County Toll Road Authority, METRO and others. We are engaged in a \$200 million project that ties the area into Metro's Park & Ride system. Basically from I-10 and 290, we are building a system that will continue on to I-610. People will be able to live where they choose, whether it is Uptown Houston or the center city when this project completed by the end of next year. If you live in, say, Fairfield and need to go to Uptown Houston, you'll never have to get in your car to go to the West Loop. You can just take transit. It's an incredible addition for asset development."

Realty News Report: Will South Post Boulevard continue to have six lanes?

Breeding: Yes. The Boulevard will be constructed in three phases and it is estimated to be completed in late 2018. Driveway access to properties along The Boulevard will be maintained at all times. Two lanes will be open in each direction in active construction segments and all traffic lanes will be open in non-active construction segments. We expect all six lanes will be completed by August 2018.

Realty News Report: Dedicated bus lanes will run in express lanes down the middle of the boulevard. Can you describe these buses? How do the bus riders access the buses?

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Breeding: If we were a few years later, we'd be using Tesla buses! But in the first generation of operations, they'll be articulated buses, painted to look similar to the light rail cars. The buses will have three door units – one front, one back and one in the middle. The bus will pull up to one of eight elevated platforms along The Boulevard and the doors will open. If you are using a wheel chair, you can roll from platform onto the bus or you can take your bike onto the bus, similar to light rail. There will be eight well designed stations over the two miles of Post Oak Boulevard, or The Boulevard as we call it.

Realty News Report: Does the plan offer improvements for pedestrians or cyclists?

Breeding: The real thrilling part of all this is what we are doing for pedestrians. We will expand the four-foot sidewalks along The Boulevard to 12-foot-wide pedestrian environments and more than triple the amount of trees. In essence, Post Oak Boulevard has 350 live oaks. When we finish, it will have over 1,000 and be a colonnade of green.

Realty News Report: Where are the terminus points of the express bus system?

Breeding: The real terminus for the bus system is wherever Metro's Park & Ride system is. The system will take you to, say, Katy or Sugar Land. A new Uptown Transit Center will be built to serve the Westpark Tollway and Southwest Freeway, allowing commuters and visitors to use the Park & Ride lots along these corridors. The busses will come into and exit through the transit center, and take the short jaunt to The Boulevard. We're building from I-10 to 59, and two miles of the four miles is on Post Oak Boulevard. We're just connecting into the system.

Realty News Report: And the timetable for all of this?

Breeding: We are moving very quickly. We have a very aggressive schedule and we are ahead of schedule. We have 93 percent of the right of way purchased. We awarded the contract for the first third of construction in July of 2016. People will be driving on three of those lanes on the southbound side soon and driving along all lanes by November. And, two days ago, we awarded \$60 million worth of contracts to build from San Felipe to Richmond.

Realty News Report: Anything else you'd like to add?

Breeding: Transit is the catalyst but the key is the context of Post Oak Boulevard — pedestrian improvements are as important as anything else. We are developing a beautiful environment for Post Oak Boulevard. We are wrapping a mobility project into our efforts to create a much more inviting Post Oak Boulevard that is the very core of the Uptown Houston area.

March 5, 2017 Realty News Report Copyright 2017